THIS CRISIS IS DIFFERENT: SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis presented unique challenges for senior student affairs officers (SSAOs). Through interviews with a diverse group of 23 SSAOs, this study investigated SSAOs perceptions of this crisis as different from other crises. SSAOs identified several characteristics that made this crisis unique: no playbook to use as a guide, the ever-changing nature of the pandemic, the duration, involvement of external entities, and intensity. Our findings highlight the importance of self-care, developing and sustaining partnerships, and balancing flexibility and guiding values when managing crises. Although COVID-19 is no longer a significant concern for student affairs leaders, the lessons learned from experiencing the pandemic remain relevant.

Keywords: Student affairs, crisis leadership, pandemic

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Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) frequently find themselves in the midst of crises (Treadwell & O'Grady, 2019). Serving in upper-level leadership roles with titles such as vice president, associate vice president, or dean of students, they are primarily responsible for the well-being and safety of students. This role often requires them to develop and implement policies and protocols to address potential crises such as natural disasters, student unrest, student deaths, and campus violence (Shaw & Roper, 2017). Although each crisis is different, SSAOs can draw upon professional development opportunities such as conferences and workshops, books, and lessons learned from past crises to inform their approaches to navigating subsequent crises (Shaw & Roper, 2017; Treadwell & O'Grady, 2019).

In the Spring of 2020, SSAOs at colleges and universities across the United States faced a large-scale crisis with the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Smalley, 2021). SSAOs once again became central figures in crisis leadership and took on the responsibility of reimagining how necessary services (e.g., financial aid, academic advising, counseling, food, housing) could be delivered in the emerging pandemic educational landscape. SSAOs were making decisions and overseeing processes that had significant consequences for the short-term health and safety of their community and the future success of their institution (Gansemer-Topf, 2023). Despite previous preparedness for crises, the quick and widespread disruption to institutions caused by COVID-19 created broader and more complex challenges than other crises (Hong et al., 2020; Lango & Kortegast, 2023). Unlike other crises that may be confined to one or a handful of institutions, the repercussions of the crisis permeated through all institutions.

These factors of pervasiveness and complexity provided a scenario that had the potential to forge new understandings of higher education crises, and the leadership skills required to manage them. Crisis management strategies are informed and honed by analyzing responses to previous crises. For example, analysis of campus police responses during the Virginia Tech shootings informed protocols and processes for crises related to active shooters (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Most existing research on student affairs crises investigates events that are confined to one institution and are more short-term. A worldwide, sustained crisis of this magnitude was an uncharted territory (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2021). Additionally, most of the research on student affairs crises and specifically research on COVID-19 was collected after the crisis event. For example, Lango and Kortegast's (2023) study examined the perceptions of 11 small college senior student affairs administrators in Spring 2021 – a year after the crisis had begun.

The paper's authors – a faculty member with extensive student affairs experience and three graduate students who were working in student affairs offices - captured SSAOs' perceptions of the COVID-19 crisis in real-time, as they navigated through the pandemic's first year. The research question guiding our study was, "How do SSAOs perceive the COVID-19 crisis compared to other crises?"

By focusing on a crisis that affected all institutions and collecting SSAOs' perceptions while they navigated COVID-19, we argue that this study provides novel insights into student affairs crisis leadership. SSAOs' decisions affect the lives of students, staff, their institution, and the field (Dungy & Ellis, 2011; NASPA, 2022); as first responders in a college crisis, SSAOs' leadership is connected directly with their perceptions of and experiences with these events (Treadwell, 2017). Although COVID-19 is no longer considered an eminent threat, the repercussions of this pandemic have had lasting consequences on institutions and student affairs (NASPA, 2022).

Literature and Theory Guiding the Study

Emergencies and crises are inevitable with-

in higher education institutions. (Gigliotti, 2020; Holzweiss & Walker, 2018; Rollo & Zdziarski, 2020). These crises can range in size and scope. Crises may be limited to one institution or a small group of students or may be more extensive and gain national attention (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2020; Treadwell et al., 2019). Catullo et al. (2009) categorized crisis into four categories: a) natural, which includes events such as hurricanes and floods; b) facility, which includes fires, evacuation of buildings, and corruption of data; c) criminal, which includes assaults, homicides, vandalism, and d) human, which includes student death, suicide, and infectious disease. Based on these categories, COVID-19 would be considered a human and facility crisis as students, faculty, and staff, and the buildings and services provided in the buildings were affected.

The literature on crisis management is vast. For the purpose of our study, we narrow our focus to a discussion of crises as they relate to SSAOs. Our study is based on the premise that COVID-19 was a crisis, and that this crisis is different than other crises. To substantiate this premise, we drew upon Gigliotti's framework for crisis leadership and research on crises in student affairs.

Gigliotti's Crisis Leadership Framework

Gigliotti's (2020) research on crisis in higher education provided the theoretical underpinnings for our qualitative study. Gigliotti defined crisis as

> events or situations of significant magnitude that threaten reputations, impact the lives of those involved in the institution, disrupt how the organization functions, have a cascading influence on leadership responsibilities and obligations across units/divisions, and require an immediate response from leaders (p. 49).

The pandemic fits this definition of crisis: the livelihood of institutions was under threat, processes and functions were disrupted, everyone at the institution felt its impact, and swift decisions needed to be made in response to these events.

Gigliotti's research not only provided a guiding definition of crisis but also emphasized that the experience of crisis is a social construct. An individual's experiences and current context influence their perceptions of a crisis; these perceptions subsequently influence actions. For example, in their examination of Kent State University shootings, Eckert (2022) concluded that contradictory perceptions of events at Kent State contributed to the tragedy. "While the administration recognized the situation was serious, the governor saw the situation as out of control" (p.9). These differences in perspective resulted in an escalation of conflict, the deployment of armed National Guard troops, and the killing of four students. Lango and Kortegast's study (2023) focused on SSAOs at small, private colleges reaffirmed Gigliotti's view that institutional context significantly influences perceptions and actions during crisis. Jackson's (2019) reflection managing through crisis during the 1999 Texas A&M University's bonfire focused on the importance of sense-making during crisis. Martinez's (2019) experiences of leading through student affairs crises and specifically focusing on the impact of crisis on staff members, led to a development of a trauma-informed framework. In each instance, perceptions had an impact on how SSAOs led during the crisis and resulted in new approaches or ways of thinking about crisis.

Therefore, given the relationship between perceptions of crisis and effective leadership, understanding individuals' perceptions of the crisis is critical (Gigliotti, 2020). For example, perceiving COVID-19 as similar to other crises is likely to elicit responses used in past crises. SSAOs' views of COVID-19 as "different" may require new decisions or alter processes for working through decisions. Gigliotti's (2020) notion of perceptions as social constructs requires us to interrogate the assumptions of an event as a crisis and the meaning attached to that experience. As Gigliotti (2020) asserts, examining leaders' perceptions of the crisis is the first step in understanding these decisions. Our study takes this first step. Focusing on SSAOs'

perspectives of the COVID-19 crisis can lead us to a better understanding of the challenges presented by the pandemic, provide a foundation for understanding how these experiences may shape the future of student affairs, and subsequently inform higher education crisis leadership strategies (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Samoilovich, 2020).

SSAOs play a critical role as institutions navigate crises. They develop plans and strategies before a potential disaster, manage the crisis event while it is happening, and lead response and recovery efforts after the crisis (Holtzweiss & Walker, 2018; Reason & Saunders, 2003; Treadwell et al., 2020). Their perceptions impact each of these activities. Treadwell and O'Grady (2019) illustrate this relationship in their co-edited book *Crisis, Compassion, and Resiliency*. This work led to new insights related to managing relationships during crisis (Sharer, 2019), caring for those involved in crisis (Jordan, 2019), and new theoretical frameworks (Martinez, 2019). Because student affairs professionals are often at the forefront of these crises, research that can continue to inform practice is critical. A more robust understanding of the experiences that SSAOs have during crises can be used to support those who must manage crisis and can improve future crisis planning (Treadwell et al., 2020).

Our study seeks to add to this understanding. Although crisis management is an increasingly important responsibility of SSAOS, the empirical research in this area is limited. Past research on SSAOs perceptions has been focused on an individual's perception of an institution specific crisis (e.g., Treadwell & O'Grady, 2019) or within one institutional context (e.g., Lango & Kortegast, 2023). In almost every instance, the data was collected after the crisis had subsided. Our study fills a significant gap in the literature by collecting perceptions in the midst of the crisis and gathers the perceptions from almost two dozen SSAOs at multiple institutional types. Therefore, the findings that arise contribute to a powerful testimony of the challenges faced by SSAO during the pandemic and subsequently, can inform practice moving forward.

Methodology

We applied the methodological paradigm of phenomenography (Marton, 1981) in the conception, design, and analysis of this study. Rooted in the interpretivist tradition, phenomenography views knowledge as a social construction and examines varying conceptions (or lack thereof) of a given phenomenon (Larsson & Hulmström, 2009; Tight, 2016). For purposes of our study, we identified the phenomenon as the experience of navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic as a student affairs senior level administrator. The value of phenomenography rests on the emphasis it places on varying conceptions (or lack thereof) of a given phenomenon, rather than centering on the structure and meaning of a phenomenon (Larsson & Hulmström, 2009; Tight, 2016). The methodology offers the flexibility to examine similarities and differences among perceptions of a phenomenon.

Phenomenography, is a powerful method for studying the work of student affairs (Rands & Gansemer-Topf, 2016) and has been used in other student affairs and higher education contexts to examine perceptions of Asian American students' perception of campus climate (Pham, 2023), undergraduate students' conceptions of integrity, and college students' perceptions of education, leadership, and citizenship (Dietzel, 2017).

We chose this approach for several reasons. One, the methodology which focuses on participants' social construction of crisis, is aligned with our theoretical framework (i.e., Gigliotti's view of crisis as a social construction). The strength of phenomenography is its emphasis on nuances in perceptions; we were most interested in these nuances. SSAOs had significant years of experience in handling crisis; we were interested in how they perceived the COVID-19 crisis as different from other crises. Additionally, because we sought out SSAOs who were working in different institutional

contexts, we could examine if these contexts had an influence on SSAOs perceptions of the crisis.

Participants

We adopted Bowden's (2005) recommendation to include 20-30 participants in phenomenographic research studies. This number allows for feasible data management while providing adequate participation variation. Prior to contacting any individuals, we obtained Institutional Review Board approval.

To achieve this goal, we used purposeful, snowball sampling (Patton, 2014). We first invited a group of 39 SSAOs who held different identities and were employed in different geographic regions and institutional types. This list was identified through a national student affairs organization. SSAOs were defined as individuals with titles such as Vice President, Associate or Assistant Vice President, and Dean of Students (Wilson, 2017). Twenty SSAOs responded. We then asked these participants to recommend others. From this snowballing method, we contacted and interviewed three additional participants.

Table 1 includes a list of the participants which includes the pseudonym they provided to us for use in the findings section. Our 23 participants include SSAOs from 14 states in three geographic regions. The gender and racial identity of the 23 participants included 11 women and 12 men. Twelve participants were white, eight were Black, two were Latinx, and one was Biracial. Institutional types represented included 12 private institutions, 11 public, 14 doctoral institutions, six Baccalaureate colleges, two community colleges, and one Master's institution. All but one SSAO had at least 15 years of student affairs experience.

We intended to select SSAOs from various institutional types but no SSAOs from racially minoritized serving institutions such as HBCUs or Tribal Colleges responded to our call for participation. We also did not receive responses from SSAOs who worked at institutions in the Western region of the US. States such as Oregon and California. These institutions were some of the first states to experience the influence of the pandemic. We acknowledge that the absence of these perspectives may have altered our findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data between August and December 2020 via Zoom as a part of a more extensive study focused on SSAO leadership through the pandemic. We used a semi-structured interview protocol that aligned with our phenomenography approach. We began by asking general questions (e.g., How would you describe your work in the past months? How would you describe the pandemic crisis?), which allowed for follow-up questions (e.g., How does this crisis compare with other crises you have navigated?) (Straub & Maynes, 2021). Although we did not intend to specifically focus on SSAOs' perceptions of differences between the COVID-19 crisis and other crises when we began the study, their responses to our initial questions prompted us to explore this topic further.

We recorded and transcribed interviews. Our analysis utilized Saldaña's (2021) two-cycle method of inductive coding while also being mindful of Straub & Maynes' (2021) guidelines for rigor in phenomenographic research. We began by reading through each transcription, assigning descriptive codes (i.e., pre-codes) to responses, and creating code maps. We then grouped codes into categories and identified patterns among categories. For example, participants discussed the crisis as "constant," "big deal," "frenetic," and "no rest," which we grouped as "intensity." We examined consistency across codes and then employed Straub and Maynes' (2021) recommendation that "the researcher will analyze and re-analyze the data set until common themes in the data begin to emerge" (p. 81).

We engaged in multiple coding, data triangulation, and member checking to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Beck, 2021). Through a recursive and iterative process of coding, we iden-

tified general themes across participants' responses (Straub & Maynes, 2021). Although not all participants mentioned each theme, we uncovered meaningful similarities (Akerlind, 2005) among SSAOs' conceptions of crisis and strategies. We conducted member checks several times throughout the study. We sent participants the study's initial findings and allowed them to review drafts of manuscripts. No participants requested changes.

Researcher Positionality

Our identities as researchers influence our approach and interpretation of findings. We have several years of experience in student affairs but not as an SSAO. Ann identifies as a white, cisgender woman who has worked at both large public and small private institutions. Kabongwe (KB) identifies as a Black cisgender man who has worked at large and midsize public institutions. Carmen identifies as a Black/African American cisgender woman who has worked at both large public and small private institutions. Virginia identifies as a black, cisgender woman who has worked in student affairs offices at midsize and large public institutions as well as small private institutions. We view our role as an insider-outsider. Ann was the lead investigator for the study. KB and Carmen assisted with the literature review, interpretation of results, and implications. Virginia joined the team after data collection and analysis was completed. We are familiar with the values, purpose, and work of student affairs and had colleagues and friends who were SSAOs at the time of COVID-19. This knowledge about, but not direct experience as an SSAO as well as Ann's position as a faculty member with tenure, provided us power over our data collection, analysis, interpretation and application in findings.

Findings

SSAOs in our study consistently described their experiences of leading during the pandemic in relation to other crises they had experienced as a leader: hurricanes, student deaths, fires, campus shootings, sexual assaults, student unrest, and hazing. This initial recognition was significant for two reasons: a) it confirmed that they viewed the pandemic as a crisis – an assumption undergirding this study, and b) it verified that they had prior experiences navigating crises on which to compare the current COVID-19 crisis. Given that many of our participants had over 20 years working in student affairs, this last point is especially noteworthy. In their past experiences, they had experienced a significant number of crises, yet the pandemic was different in many ways. Five themes emerged: no playbook to guide decisions, ever-changing, duration, involvement of external entities, and intensity. These themes are interrelated, but we present them as distinct themes to highlight their nuances.

No Playbook to Guide Decisions

Student affairs leaders prepare for crises; they develop strategies, protocols, and policies that can guide them during an emergency (Treadwell & O'Grady, 2019). Anthony acknowledged that he had received previous training in crisis management, but this was different "In VP training and in school, you don't get the pandemic training plan."

The scope and nature of COVID-19 meant that many of the usual protocols and guidelines were insufficient for navigating this crisis. In almost every interview, regardless of their institutional context, SSAOs mentioned how unprepared they were to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. The most used phrase was "no playbook." Camilla, an experienced SSAO at a doctoral research institution, frequently summarized it in this way, "So I think we can handle a crisis if we have a missing student, ... maybe sexual misconduct or, protesting, we kind of have a playbook for that. This right here is uncharted territory." A seasoned SSAO at a large public institution, Irwin, summarized, "We didn't have a playbook to borrow from." Andrew, who works at a baccalaureate institution, described, "There's usually a game plan that you follow...This [pandemic] takes the cake, though. And

I think it's because…you don't have a playbook…. We have to fly the plane as we were building it."

All participants had significant prior experiences with crisis. Although crises, as the name implies, are unplanned events, SSAOs receive training to anticipate many of these events and put in place policies and processes to address these events. During the pandemic, the current processes were not adequate and the speed of change and scope of COVID-19 made it difficult to create consistent policies; thus leaving SSAOs in "unchartered territory" without a playbook to guide them.

Ever-changing

Connected to the theme of "no playbook", was the ever-changing nature of the pandemic. At the onset, it was unclear how the virus was spreading and who was most at risk, and the guidelines recommended by organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control frequently were being revised. Not only were SSAOS navigating without a playbook but the information on which to make decisions was not always clear or consistent. SSAOs made decisions based on available information and then reconsidered or changed these decisions when new information or guidelines were available. Shirley, who works at a baccalaureate institution, discussed, the tension between needing to make decisions quickly even though, "there are still things that are changing." Sarah, at a research institution, also described leading within a constant environment of change: "Some days we would have to meet multiple times a day because things were literally changing so fast that there would be one piece of information that would change our earlier decision."

Manuel discussed how, in other crises, he could focus on the crisis, decide on the next steps, and carry them out. There was a linear process to handling a crisis, and in essence, it could be contained, and then one could "move on" to other tasks. Managing through COVID-19 was not linear but iterative and sometimes decisions which were made at one time had to be significantly altered.

Josiah expressed the concern that the ever-changing nature of the crisis altered the priorities of student affairs work, "It's like we've moved from a student affairs perspective from a world of educators and community builders to risk managers and emergency responders…that doesn't mean we didn't always have to manage risk, but it wasn't 90% of what we did."

By their nature, crises are unexpected events, but even these unexpected events have a pattern. SSAOs articulated these patterns as "usual" and "predictable" when dealing with other crises, but the ever-changing nature of the pandemic created new challenges. This ever-changing reality meant that processes, protocols, and policies frequently would need to be revisited, updated, and communicated and also shifted the focus and priorities of student affairs work.

Duration

We interviewed participants between September and November 2020, over six months after their residential campuses closed in Spring 2020. At the time of the interviews, COVID-19 management continued to dominate their efforts. In their responses, participants frequently distinguished the pandemic from other crises in terms of its duration. Southern made this comparison:

> The biggest difference is that it has sustained as a crisis longer than the way we've traditionally dealt with crisis. The way it appeared on college campuses, it's iterative, you know, and there's definitely not a start and an end. For example, a student who is experiencing a mental health issue, there's a crisis. We coalesce, we bring our collaborative teams together. We make some decisions, we actualize the plan, and then it's over, usually not lasting more than, you know, five to seven days, beginning to end. We've been in the COVID response process since March. So it's like it feels never-ending.

Jonathan had a similar response, "We're used to dealing with crisis, but they're usually resolved in a shorter time period…. this one [the pandemic

crisis] just seems not to have light at the end of the tunnel." Leslie and Alexandria described the physical and mental responses to crisis and how these responses differed for the pandemic. Leslie who works at a doctoral research institution shared, "We are wired for the adrenaline that comes when there's an active shooter on campus, or even a fire... but then it's over. I think that's been the biggest difference [navigating the pandemic], we just keep going, it's exhausting." Alexandria, who leads at a smaller, Master's level institution, provided a similar description mentioning its toll on her staff and herself.

> And with a typical crisis, there's an endpoint, right? ... we haven't had that [with this crisis]. It's been nonstop since March. I just feel burnt out right now. And it's hard because there's no end; I don't know when this is going to end.

The duration of the pandemic sets this crisis apart from others. At the time of the interviews, SSAOs had been focused on COVID-19 for at least six months, and they could not see any end in sight. In other crisis, SSAOs may be "on call" for long periods of time but their strategy was to "push through it" knowing there would be an end and they would be able to get rest. SSAOs were visibly tired and expressed fatigue at having been in crisis mode for so long. As one SSAO candidly admitted, "I'm not sure how long I can sustain this."

Involvement of External Entities

Participants mentioned that unlike other crises, which are contained within an individual campus, this pandemic influenced and was influenced by external entities such as public health departments, county and state policies, and the political environment. Giovanni an SSAO at a community college described how, as an employee of a community college, he faced the unique challenge navigating demands from the chancellor of the institution, the state in which he is located   , and the county, "So there are three kinds of overseers for

us, and you kind of have to balance all of them."

Claudia, an SSAO at a large research institution, also discussed the influence of external involvement, "We're looking at state guidelines and CDC guidelines and relying on a lot of external agencies, not only for guidance but receiving some pressure from local external agencies in a way that may be different from other crises." James spoke explicitly about the challenges created by the political environment,

> The response to it [the pandemic] has been politicized in a highly polarized political environment. And so the opinions that people hold about what we should be doing, whether we should be reopening, how we should be responding, simple things like requiring people to wear a face covering on campus are highly political issues. Our ability to do our work on campus is influenced by the response of our political leaders to the pandemic.

SSAOs, regardless of institutional control (public vs. private) or size, felt additional pressure from external entities. In other crises, external entities may have some oversight or opinion, but usually SSAOs were afforded the power to make decisions within their own campus context. During COVID-19, this power shifted. External players did exert an influence on decision-making that altered institutional directives. SSAOs remained committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of students, but they admitted that some decisions they were forced to make ran counter to this commitment.

Intensity

The lack of a playbook, ever-changing nature, duration and involvement of others created an intensity that far surpassed other crises. In many interviews, SSAOs were visibly exhausted, overwhelmed, and deflated. SSAOs who were used to planning and proactively trying to create positive learning environments for students, were forced into making reactive decisions that had significant consequences for the future health and safety of

their community and their institutions' financial stability. A SSAO at a small liberal arts institution that was struggling financially, Andrew offered, "We must do well at this. Otherwise, there are big repercussions for that [health and safety of students and staff and institutional viability]." SSAOs such as Daniel summarized this pressure:

> The pandemic produces a much higher level of fear and uncertainty. The stakes are incredibly high. Every move that you make has an intensity to it. This is a constant crisis, constant, constant intensity, and there's just no room for failure whatsoever because it could result in life or death.

Several unique aspects of the pandemic coalesced to create a highly intense crisis. Not only did the duration and ever-changing nature of the pandemic create an intensity unlike other crises, but the repercussions of these decisions weighed heavily on the minds and hearts of SSAOs. Their decisions, as they described them, had political consequences for the future of higher education, the financial stability of their institution, and the life or death of students, staff, and faculty. Juggling these realities in an ever-changing environment with "no end in sight" created a highly intense situation.

Discussion

Crisis management is an expected and critical responsibility of student affairs work (Wilson, 2017). The safety and well-being of students, faculty, staff, campus reputation, and financial stability hinge upon student affairs professionals' ability to effectively assess and navigate a crisis. This ability is significantly influenced by their perceptions of the crisis (Eckert, 2022; Gigliotti, 2020). SSAOs did perceive the pandemic as a crisis. By using phenomenography, we gained insight into how SSAOs viewed this crisis as different from other crises.

Our participants were not new to the field,

they were seasoned, experienced student affairs professionals who had faced other crises. Additionally, they were experiencing the pandemic within different institutional contexts. Yet, despite these previous experiences and despite their institutional differences, they all agreed that the pandemic was unique. Unlike other crises, which had a beginning and end, the intense, ongoing, ever-changing nature of the pandemic created additional levels of stress and approaches to crisis.

Our findings contribute to the research on student affairs crisis management in two noteworthy ways. One, because we focused on SSAOs' perceptions of the pandemic as different from other crises, we gained a greater appreciation of the challenges involved in crisis management. Institutions have protocols and policies to address many crises, but during the pandemic, SSAOs were simultaneously creating, implementing, and adjusting protocols. An ability to remain flexible and adaptive is key amid a rapidly evolving crisis (Ward-Roof et al., 2024).

Secondly, unlike most studies that examine perceptions after the crisis, SSAOs were reflecting on their experiences in the midst of the crisis. By gathering their perceptions in "real-time," we get a more acute awareness of the emotional and mental energy needed to navigate a crisis. SSAOs graciously and willingly agreed to an interview yet appeared exhausted during the virtual interviews. There was an intense, focused commitment to doing the right thing for the students, yet they knew their decisions would be questioned and critiqued. This finding calls us to consider the very real and harmful consequences of serving in this leadership position. Despite existing literature on SSAOs' roles during crises (Eckert, 2022; Treadwell, 2017; Treadwell et al., 2020), there needs to be more scholarship on best-preparing SSAOs to navigate the emotional aspects of crises effectively.

Implications for Practice

In addition to building upon the existing literature on crisis leadership, our findings have implications for student affairs educators, institutions, and the field. Our study captured SSAOs perceptions within the first year of the pandemic. Although the immediate threat of the virus has waned, the lingering effects of the pandemic are still evident. The health and wellness of students continue to be a priority at many colleges and universities (Mowreader, 2023). After being somewhat isolated during COVID-19, students are showing a renewed interest in opportunities for engagement, but also want flexibility in format and time commitment (Ward-Roof et al., 2024). Student affairs staff have similar requests. They are focused on their health and wellness and while staff understand the need to support students, they also want flexibility in how this work gets done. SSAOs will need to find a balance in supporting students and supporting the staff who care for students (McCarthy, 2020; NASPA, 2022). For many of the SSAOs, especially those who had been in the profession for a long time, this focus on staff self-care and wellness became a new priority (Ward-Roof et al., 2024).

Navigating crises is an unfortunate but common aspect of student affairs work (Treadwell & O'Grady, 2019), but the emotional, mental, and physical toll on SSAOs is rarely ever highlighted. SSAOs in our study acknowledged the stress and pressure of leading during this time, and some participants questioned their ability to continue in their roles. This struggle should not be viewed as a sign of weakness; instead, we hope that acknowledging this struggle demonstrates to future leaders that it is okay to be vulnerable. As Segawa (2020) succinctly cautioned, "Heroics have limitations" (p. 14). Given this reality, it is critical that SSAOs find productive and healthy ways to manage this stress. Because ongoing pressure can significantly impact these administrators' professional and personal well-being, crisis management plans must include care for the caretakers (Jordan, 2019). Formally embedding and employing emotional and mental health strategies and supports within these plans can alleviate these adverse effects (Treadwell, 2017).

Although SSAOs did not feel they could be away from campus for extended periods, it is possible to set aside time each day for exercise or meditation or enact flexibility in time management workload (Jackson Preston et al., 2022). Hall (2022) even challenges institutional leaders to consider providing sabbaticals for SSAOs. Like a faculty sabbatical, these extended periods of time off can allow SSAOs time for rest, reflection, and opportunities for proactive professional development. Additionally, this formal leave creates a systemic mechanism to promote the SSAO's mental and emotional well-being rather than placing that responsibility solely on the SSAOs themselves.

The magnitude of the pandemic made it clear that managing the crisis would require a team effort. In previous work (Gansemer-Topf, 2023) we noted that some institutions had already established crisis response teams whereas others were scrambling to put these teams together. Our findings reiterate the need to have an institution-wide committee that meets regularly and has established clear and consistent lines of communication. SSAOs could also set and execute a professional development curriculum for committee members that could help relieve SSAOs' burden of managing all aspects of the crisis. This approach could provide SSAOs with a mental and physical reprieve from being the only person managing crisis response and it also demonstrates a confidence and value in the skills and expertise of other staff members.

Overall, the number of individuals interested in working in student affairs is declining (NASPA, 2021), and current student affairs professionals are leaving the field to pursue other opportunities. The lack of compensation, work-life balance, and feeling undervalued are key factors for this departure (NASPA, 2022). This current reality, coupled

with the findings from our study, highlights the necessity for re-envisioning student affairs work. Shifting the culture of student affairs can begin with SSAOs. Creating an institutional culture where self-care is modeled, and staff feel involved and supported can begin the culture shift. Conversations around these issues and self-awareness can be small, but significant steps (Lango & Kortegast, 2023). The pandemic illustrated the creativity of student affairs professionals to provide services and support in new ways to our students. Our collective creativity indeed can be harnessed to find ways to support our colleagues and our profession.

Colleges and universities have invested heavily in programs, policies, and funding to enhance student development and retention. This focus must also extend to those who carry out these services. By implementing expectations and policies focusing on staff development and retention, SSAOs can create environments where student affairs professionals thrive. These strategies not only are an investment in individual staff members but are necessary to enhance college student success and the survival of the student affairs profession (Ward-Roof et al., 2024).

The pandemic required student affairs professionals at all experience levels to be involved in crisis management in some way. Our study focused on senior level administrators. Examining the perceptions of the pandemic from those in entry and mid-level professionals can also inform crisis leadership, add to our understanding of the effects of the pandemic, and suggest changes for improving the student affairs profession. Crises, by definition, are unpredictable, but recognizing one's perception of crisis and the ability to attend to the mental and emotional aspects of crisis will be key to responding to the crisis.

Conclusion

This study examined SSAOs' perceptions of the pandemic within the crisis's first six to eight months. COVID-19 is no longer at the forefront of institutional decision-making, but the repercussions are still evident. Crisis management will continue to be an aspect of student affairs work. Studying the experiences of student affairs professionals during a unique type of crisis offer insights into the invaluable role of student affairs professionals, highlights the importance of developing strategies for self-care and support for these leaders, and demonstrates the need for additional research in this area.

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Table 1

Profile of the Participants

Name	Gender	Sexual Identity*	Race/ Ethnicity	Carnegie Classification	Control	Geographic Region	# of Years in Profession
Alexandria	Female	Heterosexual	African American/Black	Master's	Public	Midwest	31
Andrew	Male	Heterosexual	White	Baccalaureate	Private	Midwest	20+
Anthony	Male	Heterosexual	Black	Doctoral, professional	Public	South	20+
Camila	Female	NR	Black	Doctoral, very high research	Public	Midwest	20+
Claudia	Female	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, very high research	Private	Northeast	18
Daniel	Male	Heterosexual	Black	Doctoral, very high research	Public	Midwest	26
Denise	Female	NR	Black	Baccalaureate	Private	Midwest	20+
Don	Male	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, very high research	Private	Midwest	38
Geovanni	Male	Gay	Latino	Community College	Public	Northeast	26
Henry	Male	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, very high research	Public	South	17
Irwin	Male	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, very high research	Public	South	22
James	Male	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, professional	Private	South	28
Jonathan	Male	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, very high research	Private	South	38
Josiah	Male	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, professional	Private	Northeast	38
Leslie	Female	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, very high research	Public	South	25
Lydia	Female	Heterosexual	Black	Community College	Public	Midwest	25
Manuel	Male	Gay	Latinx	Doctoral, very high research	Public	Midwest	20
Maria	Female	Heterosexual	Biracial /Latina	Baccalaureate	Private	Northeast	35
Renee	Female	NR	Black	Baccalaureate	Private	Northeast	20+
Sarah	Female	Heterosexual	White	Doctoral, very high research	Public	Midwest	5
Shirley	Female	Heterosexual	White	Baccalaureate	Private	Midwest	37
Skip	Male	Heterosexual	White	Baccalaureate	Private	Midwest	31
Southern	Female	Heterosexual	Black	Doctoral, very high research	Private	South	20+

Notes: Participants listed in alphabetical order by pseudonym
*NR = No Response