

Exploring Persistence in Student Affairs

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Abstract

The student affairs profession suffers a high turnover rate, and Marshall et al. (2016) reported 50%–60% of student affairs practitioners leave the field in the first 5 years of their careers. To explore why some student affairs practitioners have persisted more than 16 years in the profession, I conducted a qualitative, phenomenological study of the influences of career persistence using the research question: What personal and professional experiences influence seasoned student affairs practitioners' decision to stay in the profession? I interviewed four current student affairs professionals in North America who hold various social identities and have persisted in the field for more than 16 years to represent some staff who have experienced this phenomenon. The student affairs professionals interviewed in this study cited three positive influences of their decisions to persist in the profession: a strong sense of (a) *why*: purpose and impact, (b) *how*: relationships with others, and (c) *what*: entrenchment. Beyond these larger themes, participants described the deep essences of advocating toward an equitable world (why), being in community (how), and investing deeply in this chosen vocation (what) as interacting with the characteristics, experiences, contexts, and environments toward persistence. This study informs the field about increasing staff engagement and persistence in higher education and student affairs by promoting opportunities for vocational growth and development, fostering supportive networks, and enabling deep reflection on a sense of purpose.

Keywords: student affairs, purpose, impact, relationships, entrenchment, persistence

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Student affairs practitioners on college and university campuses support students and foster holistic development outside of the classroom. The functional areas comprising student affairs varies by campus but span the collegiate environment including residential life, student conduct, diversity and inclusion, student activities, career advancement, and others. Staff must continue to remain motivated and resilient through adversity to persist in the profession, as the very nature of student affairs work often includes high-stress environments, crisis management, hierarchy and political bureaucracy, increasing workloads, and declining resources (Marshall et al., 2016). Exploring longevity in the student affairs profession may inform future student affairs leaders on staff engagement and persistence in higher education and student affairs. This study drew inspiration from the conceptual framework adapted by Reason (2009) as a comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence.

Literature Review

This study highlights why student affairs staff choose to stay in the field of higher education and contributes to the body of educational knowledge and literature for the next generation of student affairs practitioners. I identified persistence, career commitment, and entrenchment as frameworks connected to my study.

Persistence

Researchers have studied the career persistence of working professionals in various career fields, but little is known about higher education and student affairs. Reason (2009) provided a comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence that can be adapted for staff in this study. The model identified four sets of constructs that interact to influence students' persistence. These included (a) student precollege characteristics and experiences (e.g., sociodemographic traits, academic preparation and performance, and student dispositions); (b) organizational context (e.g., the behavior, culture, and climate of the institution); (c) the student peer environment (e.g., the student body, and the dominant system

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of beliefs, values, expectations, and attitudes); and (d) the individual student experience, both in and outside of the classroom, and experiences contributing to students' learning. The organizational context and peer environment are co-located in students' college experience. In the model, each of the four constructs interacted and influenced student persistence. Reason (2009) concluded one must approach the study and practice of student persistence as a multidimensional problem by addressing the multiple forces operating in multiple settings influencing persistence. Similar to Reason's (2009) model of student persistence, this study centers why individuals persist, not how institutions retain staff. I believe the approaches to persistence for student affairs staff should also be viewed as a multidimensional issue, beginning with their personal and professional identity as inputs into their career environment. Understanding organizational health and behavior along with peer environments and networks can provide context for individuals' influential experiences of persistence in the profession throughout their career.

Career Commitment

Based on London's (1983) theory of career motivation, the two components of career commitment are career resilience and career identity. Colarelli and Bishop (1990) defined career identity as the component embodying one's emotions. Lydon and Zanna (1990) defined career resilience as the persistence component of commitment used to tap commitment in the face of adversity. These definitions, built upon one another, created a scaffold for my interview questions as they related to the emotional connections to the student affairs profession, planning and career goals, and the resilience to persist over time.

Career Entrenchment

Osherson (1980) stated some staff are simply entrenched in their careers, perhaps unable to or not wanting to pursue other options. Career entrenchment, as defined by Carson et al. (1995), is the perspective that employees remain in an occupation because of extrinsic rewards associated with a career and losses incurred when leaving. Carson et al. argued skills

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become more career-specific over time, which limits the available career alternatives. In other words, career entrenchment increases over time and opportunities may go unnoticed if one is maintaining their investments and minimizing emotional costs. Wilson et al. (2016) found “career contentment was related to two commitment subscales (identity and resilience) and two entrenchment subscales (investments and emotional costs)” (p. 568). The researchers also suggested “a qualitative study with cohorts of midlevel professionals of similar age may better identify what is salient to professional identity across a career and help generate strategies for fostering satisfaction and retention in the field” (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 568). This suggestion was the foundation for my qualitative study, as there was not previous research on seasoned student affairs professionals related to reflection on their longevity or persistence.

Conclusions

The framework for this study, adapted from Reason’s (2009) persistence framework for student persistence, generated a conceptual framework to organize the data for my study of student affairs professionals and their reasons to persist in their jobs. The four constructs for the student affairs personnel framework include: (a) pre-career characteristics, (b) organizational context, (c) peer environment, and (d) individual experiences. I hypothesized all four constructs play a role in persistence on the job of student affairs professionals.

Researchers (London’s, 1983; Lydon and Zanna, 1990; Wilson et al., 2016) have studied career motivation, commitment, and entrenchment of working professionals in various fields, but little is known about higher education and student affairs. I explored persistence via career commitment through (a) career identity, the emotional association with one’s career; (b) career planning, determining one’s developmental needs and setting career goals; and (c) career resilience, resisting career disruption in the face of adversity. These factors fell into the pre-career characteristics and experiences domain of the adapted conceptual framework for this study. Additionally, I explored career entrenchment through (a) career investments, accumulated investments in one’s career; (b) emotional costs, anticipated emotional costs

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associated with pursuing a new career; and (c) limited career alternatives, perceived lack of available options for pursuing a new career. These were components of both the organizational context and peer environment constructs of the framework. I drew inspiration from Wilson et al. (2016), who called for a qualitative study to complement their findings of midlevel professionals. The purpose of this study was to assess my hypothesis that all four constructs of the conceptual framework influenced one's retention and persistence in the profession over time with particular attention to peer environments and individual experiences.

Methodology

This study allowed several seasoned student affairs practitioners to reflect on experiences that have influenced their career longevity in higher education. To explore why some student affairs practitioners have persisted more than 16 years in the profession, I addressed the research question: What personal and professional experiences influence seasoned student affairs practitioners' decision to stay in the profession?

Purpose

Exploring longevity in the student affairs profession may inform future student affairs leaders on staff engagement and persistence in higher education and student affairs. This research design allowed seasoned student affairs practitioners to reflect on experiences that have affected their career longevity in higher education.

Research Design

To understand the persistence of a few individuals in student affairs, I conducted a phenomenological study to capture the lived experiences of participants as they made meaning of persistence in the profession. I selected phenomenology as it is the best qualitative approach to understand the essence of persistence across multiple subjects with common experiences. This approach provided an in-depth understanding of how a collective group has experienced longevity through participants' descriptions of influences on their personal and professional

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lives. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained, “Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 75).

Methods

A qualitative study was the best approach to understand the essence of this phenomenon, as dialogue allowed me to capture the detailed stories of persistence that would not be collected via a quantitative design. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained qualitative research can provide a complex, detailed understanding of the issue by “talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (p. 45). Qualitative research provides opportunities for storytelling, in-depth inquiry with a small sample size, and allows for an open-ended question design to capture the descriptive experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

With this phenomenological approach, I conducted and recorded a face-to-face, 60- to 90-minute interview with each participant. While interviewing, I used prompts to establish rapport and solicited honest answers in dialogue, leading to storytelling epiphanies and influential experiences of persistence. I asked participants about their career history and any salient dimensions or experiences that have contributed to persistence. I wrote my thoughts in a researcher’s journal as I interviewed participants and reviewed each transcript to be sure the interviews captured the data necessary to answer the research question with saturated themes. Common themes surfaced across participants, and I reached saturation of these data, as no new information was given across participant interviews.

Participants and Setting

This study was approved by the New England College Institutional Review Board in October 2018. As the sample size for phenomenology suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) typically varies in size fewer than 15, I began with four participants for manageable interview data collection. Initial data collection was conducted in person, with the exception of one

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international participant interview, which was conducted via an online Zoom interview.

Conducting the interviews in person and via Zoom allowed participants to be in a space of their choice and provided a sense of comfort. Selected participants were current student affairs staff members at colleges or universities in North America who met the longevity criteria, varied in social identities, and were willing to complete the research process so as to capture themes across diverse personal and professional experiences.

Four seasoned student affairs professionals participated in this study and described their lived experiences influencing their persistence in the profession. All have worked in student affairs for more than 15 years, with a range of 16–32 years across the four participants. Two identify as cisgender women, two as cisgender men, one as Black, and three as White. Two are married, and three are parents. All four had earned a master's degree, three from a higher education and student affairs program. Additionally, one had earned a doctorate, and two had completed some doctoral courses. All four participants worked at institutions with more than 10,000 students; three worked at 4-year private institutions in the United States and one at a 4-year public institution in Canada. Previously, two participants worked at both public and private institutions. Participants' titles ranged from associate director to assistant vice president, and their aggregate current functional areas included orientation, diversity, equity, and inclusion, undergraduate and graduate student support services, mentorship, student involvement, clubs and organizations, leadership education, student centers, international affairs, sexual misconduct prevention, and Title IX. In an effort to protect participants' identity, each provided a pseudonym and brief bio for the reader to contextualize their quotes (see Table 1).

Sara (she/her/hers) has worked in student affairs for the past 16 years in a wide variety of roles, including academic advising, student organization advising, event planning, orientation, commencement, registration and records, disciplinary affairs, crisis management, and mental health, financial, and academic advocacy. She has worked at five private institutions and has

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focused on being a generalist in the field of student affairs. She has completed both her master's and doctorate in higher education.

Table 1

Participant Demographics at a Glance

Name	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Parent	First Gen	Highest Degree	# Years
Sara	White	Cis Woman	Heterosexual	Yes	Yes	EdD	17
Lloyd	White	Cis Man	Gay	Yes	No	Master's	32
Nate	White	Cis Man	Queer	No	No	Master's	16
Cherisse	Black	Cis Woman	Heterosexual	Yes	Yes	Master's	22

Note. To protect identity, participants provided a pseudonym.

Lloyd (he/him/his) has worked in student affairs for over 32 years, mostly in the area of cocurricular programming and support and graduate student academic support. He has predominantly worked at private, highly selective institutions. These position titles included assistant director, director, executive director, assistant dean of students, acting dean of students, and assistant vice president. Lloyd completed his master's degree in higher education.

Nate (he/him/his) has more than 15 years of practical experience in the field of student affairs, entirely on university campuses in Ontario, Canada. He has worked at four different universities in the areas of residence life, community engaged-learning and civic engagement, first-year experience, first-generation student support, academic learning and leadership education, student clubs and leadership development, and mentorship and peer programs. He completed his master's degree in student affairs and is currently pursuing a PhD in higher education.

Cherisse (she/her/hers) has been in the student affairs profession for more than 20 years. She has worked at four institutions, including one public and three private and predominantly White institutions. Throughout her career, Cherisse has worked in both housing

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and student activities. She completed her master's degree in urban development and is considering higher education doctoral programs.

Results

Using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, I first answered the interview questions from my own career timeline and perspective, as Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested, "To fully describe how participants view the phenomenon, researchers must bracket out, as much as possible, their own experiences" (p. 79). I needed to explore my career timeline and influences as a researcher who has also experienced the phenomenon of persistence in the profession to distance myself before I heard participants' experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018), who outlined the process, wrote, "Analyzing the data for themes, using different approaches to examine the information, and considering the guides for reflection should yield an explicit structure of the meaning of the lived experience" (p. 202).

Second, I sent each audio-recorded interview for initial transcription using the software feature included with a Rev.com membership. I then checked each transcription for accuracy and manually edited each. The next step was horizontalization of the data, where I reread each interview transcript to highlight significant statements of equal weight and documented memos for each statement to later assign codes to my interpretation.

Third, I typed up each code into an Excel spreadsheet and printed the enlarged pages to physically cut and sort the codes into clusters of meaning, as Creswell and Poth (2018) described. From the 483 codes, 12 themes emerged that I then grouped into larger units based on the conceptual framework. I then sorted each coded quote to the theme to capture the direct words from participants and summarized my interpretation of the lived experience. I shared themes from each individual participant's transcript and the aggregate larger unit themes with each respective participant to ensure the essence of their lived experience was described with integrity.

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Participants in this study self-reported influential experiences, context, and environments related to their individual persistence, helping readers further understand the phenomenon of persistence in student affairs. Data were presented as what participants experienced, how they experienced it, and how those aspects interact to reveal the essence of why they persist. Based on the conceptual framework for this study, I grouped the cluster themes from codes into three larger units: (a) what: the path, (b) how: the relationships, and (c) why: the purpose. From my interpretation, I used the analysis described by Moustakas (1994) to provide a textual description of what participants experienced and a structural description of how they experienced it and then combined these to convey the why, the essence of the collective experiences. Ultimately, the essences of the path, the people, and the purpose interact to influence why student affairs practitioners persist in the profession.

What: The Path

The theme of the path, conceptualized as the idea that one is entrenched in the career as a vocation, emerged as an influence on student affairs practitioners' career persistence. As their portfolios have expanded, responsibilities have grown, and supervision responsibilities have increased, participants have aligned personal interests and values with professional opportunities. The path is *what* participants have experienced along their career, resembling a map with multiple jobs in different locations but all in the student affairs career. Two subthemes related to the path theme arose from the data: undergraduate socialization experiences and career trajectory.

Participants have stayed in the profession because they were committed to their positions, found new opportunities or promotion at their institutions, or sought new opportunities at other institutions. These reflections of their experiences and moves throughout their career were promotions and growth opportunities that helped them make sense of their work in new or deeper ways. Each participant spoke about their own undergraduate experience, how someone identified or "tapped" them to consider student affairs as a profession, and how those became

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reference points for their career trajectories. Sara shared, “I really had a great [overall] experience as an undergrad. And I wanted to be able to provide to students that same type of [out-of-classroom] experience.” Lloyd shared, “One of those moments where someone said, ‘Have you ever thought about doing this for a career?’ I’m like, ‘You can get paid to do this?’” Student affairs professionals seek to create conditions where students can thrive. As a result, staff experience congruence with their previous experiences and their chosen vocation, which reflects and affects staff persistence and thriving as well. The intersections of undergraduate, graduate, and career experiences crystallized participants’ intent to stay in the career of student affairs. Their collective socialization served as a gateway to the profession, complemented by a community of mentors discussed in the next section.

How: The Relationships

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was how participants have stayed in the profession through a supportive network of relationships with self, students, peers, and mentors. Meaningful and influential relationships with others have positively impacted participants’ careers. Unlike many other careers, student affairs is a profession where identity is explicitly explored, discussed, validated, and supported. The people in this profession often share this common bond, which helped participants feel like they could be seen, be heard, be visible, and be affirmed.

Student affairs is an international community of scholars, a social circle of peers, and an interconnected network of mentors. Seasoned student affairs practitioners have relationships with themselves and others that positively influence their persistence based on the subthemes: (a) identity, (b) traits, (c) peers and mentors, (d) overcoming comparison and negativity, (e) benefits, and (f) balance. Beyond *what* participants experienced, these factors impact *how* participants have persisted in the profession in that they have developed traits, cultivated relationships, and learned how to navigate collegiate environments. The theme of extrinsic motivation surfaced as participants talked about their relationships with peers, students, and

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their communities, resulting in their unwillingness to leave the profession. Cherisse captured her experience with peers and mentorship in her interview:

My supervisor there is still my mentor, a great mentor, really taught me a lot about raising children and having a career in the profession of student affairs. I think, again it goes back to having really good mentors who really instilled in me, clearly you don't do this for the paycheck. You find passion in what you do. I think, for me, I'm like, "Okay, is this still passionate? Is this the passion?" And the answer is yes. I get influenced by seeing good mentors who are bold enough to say, "I'm in this job and I don't have passion." Brave enough to walk away and do something differently. That influences me. When I see folx who aren't afraid to step outside of what is the traditional, the norm, and do something different and follow their passion. Not necessarily be worried about jumping up and climbing that ladder of success.

These staff were passionate and dedicated to student success; they not only felt the need to stay in the profession but also compelled to continue the work. Several mentioned their ability to overcome adversity and continue to work in student affairs to support students with similar identities. Surrounding oneself with people who also believe in the power of education may be different motivation than for staff in other sectors. Thus, the meaning and purpose of development of students is not only fulfilling but also supports the identity development of staff.

Why: The Purpose

The profound concept of purpose, including the interconnectedness of passion, motivation, students, and the value of higher education's pursuit of equity, was the third theme that emerged from participant interviews. Cherisse shared her passion for education mirrored in a student interview: "Meeting with the students during my interviews and seeing the passion they had for what they do here made me realize that I, too, wanted to be here." Nate reflected on the purpose of higher education and his passion for working with college-aged students: "I think about the teaching and the training and the learning." Lloyd declared, "I can't imagine

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doing anything else,” which was indicative he had such passion for the industry that he couldn’t find the words or the thoughts of leaving the field. All four participants spoke to their deep connection to the higher calling of the profession as the value of education and its pursuit of justice. Nate reflected:

I believe in the power of what our institutions accomplish like I believe in the power of higher education. I believe that it is good for our society to have educated people who have a chance to make positive differences and it sounds really, kind of, utopian but that's the kind of world I want to live in.

This sense of purpose anchored the professionals in a way that cemented their career persistence with such clarity they could not even imagine doing anything else.

Higher education student affairs is a profession in which one can pursue challenging systems toward equity in the campus environment and beyond. These seasoned student affairs practitioners anchored their persistence in their *why*, a deep sense of purpose and its connections to: (a) passion, (b) motivation, (c) students, and (d) equity. Specifically, higher education is a profession that articulates its values, intentions, and mission, and all four participants spoke to their calling to higher education and its pursuit of justice as a direct result of congruence with these values and mission. Participants were reflective of their motivation toward the pursuit of equity by supporting students’ learning and growth. Lloyd said he persists in the profession because he makes a difference in students’ lives and ultimately contributes to making the world better:

We don’t do this for the money. I probably could stay in this job, I mean I could stay at this level and as long as the work is meaningful for me, and for the people who are on the other side of that, great. I’m the guy who still takes the crosswalks, but the people who are willing to kind of challenge convention and that’s what we’re teaching people to do. That's the only way that the world is going to get better. So, you know, if you’re having some role in that, good lord, why would you leave? It’s better being an

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investment banker or being a frickin' lawyer. I feel like I'm influencing people and the choices that they make, so that's . . . why in the world? I wouldn't want to give that up. You know, we're here to stir the pot for them too and make them think. Part of it is you . . . I think you get to a place where . . . ever heard of the movie, I think it was *Sister Act II*? When Whoopi Goldberg and Lauryn Hill were chatting, and Lauryn Hill wanted to sing but her mother didn't want her to sing. Whoopi Goldberg goes like, "If you're supposed to sing, sing." That's kind of the way I am about how I look at . . . I'm supposed to be doing what I'm doing and maybe not here [at this institution], and maybe not with this same portfolio [of reporting units], but if I'm supposed to be making a difference in students' lives and their experience then there it is.

This clarity allowed participants to pivot from their own undergraduate major, pursue student affairs, and commit so deeply that, over time, they could not imagine doing anything else.

Essences

The findings of this study are not mutually exclusive, and the dimensions interact between the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* to provide the essences undergirding the phenomenon of persistence. Persistence in student affairs is a phenomenon by which participants believe the work is not yet done and stay in the profession because student affairs is a genuinely meaningful career, where they are helping other people find their value. The three interacting essences are investment in the profession, being in community, and advocating for equity. The power of centering *why* they believe in higher education helped participants persist in student affairs. This purpose is far beyond *what* they did in their functional roles or their previous experiences and far beyond *how* they persist with their supportive networks of colleagues.

From my interpretation of the interviews, this phenomenon was a deeply rooted commitment to the impact they believe they can have on student learning and development, as evidenced in the data. Student affairs practitioners can impact the lives of many individuals, often planting initial seeds that will not bear immediate fruit. Participants spoke to impactful

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moments and the gratitude they have received from former students. Cherisse shared a powerful, personal story about her impact on a student:

And it's rewarding. I have a book over there on my bookshelf. Quick story I gotta to tell you. I had a young woman who came in as a freshman. Very awkward. She said, "Oh, I need a job." I don't know. It was something about her, I saw something in her. I hired her as an office assistant and then eventually one of my RAs. She worked the entire 4 years, decided to go into the field. I knew that I had kind of impacted her but not so deeply, I did not realize. Until she, I want to say 3 years ago, I got a package in the mail. It was a book. It was her dissertation. It's on my shelf there. It was a card and it was bookmarked and she wrote a page about me and wrote about how I inspired her to be in student affairs and how I took a chance on her and really, you know, mentored her. I was very struck by that. I think that's why I stay in student affairs. Because you never know how and what capacity you touch somebody. I was like, "Wow, that's amazing."

Student affairs practitioners assess learning, programs, initiatives, spaces, and services, and they have data to prove where and how students learn and develop. Student affairs fosters education and assessment beyond the classroom, with evidence demonstrating the impact of the work. Shaping and honing students' life skills through experiential learning helps sharpen their ways of knowing and reinforces the collective power of higher education and student affairs.

Along participants' trajectories, they have made decisions to move institutions or positions but not leave the field, as this career is their long-term invested vocation. They shared they have experienced increased responsibilities such as unit oversight and supervision, shifts in functional areas, and upward progression in job title. There are often good employment benefits and positive interactions with peers, students, and mentors throughout one's career. The flow and natural turnover of staff and cycle of new students promotes an iterative, ever-changing environment that presents a spark of the unknown. Furthermore, there is not always a

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specific guidebook for the work as educators outside of the classroom, creating endless opportunities and possibilities for autonomy, creativity, design, collaboration, and sharing knowledge across institutions. Participants said these constructs all interacted to lead to increased satisfaction, a sense of expertise, and motivating validation, which positively influenced their decision to stay in student affairs.

Participants noted not feeling alone as another reason they have stayed. No one in this study entered college with the aspiration to work in student affairs and only realized the profession and their potential through someone else, an advisor or mentor. As a result of feeling enabled, participants felt valued; consequently, they found leaving hard to imagine, which I interpreted as the essence of a natural sense of feeling connected, needed, and purposeful. I also interpreted this as the notion there is a special, common bond between student affairs professionals, no matter if strangers or close colleagues. Each practitioner in this study found lifelong mentors, friends, and former students who created a supportive community and built connections across the field. Sara shared:

My colleagues, my support network was just so important and I'm still friends with those individuals today. Those are the people that I stick around for, if you're gonna be anyplace and away from your family, that's what you do.

She continued: "My colleague in that [former] role is one of my best friends to this day. So, again, kind of finding that social network within . . . you're spending so much time with these people." They have overcome comparison, negativity, and judgment from other peers by focusing on their purpose and continued impact and legacy. This network resulted in their inability to imagine doing anything else as a career, thus positively affecting their persistence.

Moreover, participants in this study surfaced the idea staff can use their voice both individually and collectively toward the pursuit of equity and advocate through the student affairs profession. I interpreted participants' stay in the profession as a commitment to educate the next generation of leaders and scholars. Supporting and educating student development through

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encouraging critical thinking and self-efficacy while challenging historical, dominant narratives is an example of promoting an equitable learning environment. The pursuit of equity requires actively challenging the historical foundation upon which universities were established to educate the white elite and interrogates to disrupt white supremacy culture. Nate spoke to his role as a White person in creating a more equitable world, starting with leadership roles on college campuses:

One of the things that I think about a lot is does our university need more White senior level managers. So, I start thinking about that is my goal but is that what the world needs. Especially in our universities, which are so dominated by Whiteness in our upper level. So, I just think about, even if it isn't a goal, the world is telling me my whole life that I deserve every goal I ever want but that's not the case for all of our students and all of our colleagues, so do I need to temper that a little bit. I really am grounded in this notion of what is a kind of world that I want us to be living in and how are we creating these rungs in the ladder so we have a diverse pool of folks to pull from.

The staff spoke with such depth and intentional purpose toward helping shape students' sense of self, particularly students with minoritized and marginalized identities. Through research and scholarship, the profession has evolved technologies and collective understanding of student development, which contributes to our common goal of positive change. All of the participants had a mindset or simple reminders to keep their values intentionally present, positively contributing to their persistence. The staff felt they could contribute to something greater through student affairs, shaping young minds and planting seeds of justice for the present and future.

Overall, participants felt called to continue doing the work, improving campus environments, supporting student learning and development, all while interacting in a community of educators. I believe student affairs practitioners have a pivotal role in human development, and staff feel a calling and a sense of urgency to shape young minds. One

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person, making one change, sees the ripple effect by believing in the power of exponential impact, in this large, interconnected, and relational profession. When educators do not feel alone and isolated, they are reminded and empowered by the power of the collective reach and global impact.

Summary/Conclusions of Results

My analysis of the data revealed detailed the personal and professional experiences influencing persistence: (a) the what, the path; (b) the how, the relationships; and (c) the why, the purpose. I defined the path as *what* participants experienced through their career entrenchment, from undergraduate socialization and trajectory. I then defined *how* participants have persisted from support systems through relationships with identity, traits, peers and mentors, benefits, overcoming negativity, and finding balance. Last, and arguably most important, was participants' *why*, or their sense of purpose. The purpose included a deep passion and motivation to support students and their development, all toward higher education's pursuit of equity. The interacting essences that undergird these influences are investing in this chosen vocation, being in community, and advocating toward equity.

Discussion

Applying the findings to this conceptual framework, I found seasoned student affairs practitioners also come to persist in their career through these four constructs. First, student affairs staff have a range of personal and social background characteristics, values, and experiences. Participants in this study spoke to career commitment to the field, personal and professional values alignment and congruence, and investments they are unwilling to return. Thus, this study found the dimensions of professional identity (commitment, congruence, and investment) to be true of seasoned student affairs practitioners. Second, the organizational context affects how staff navigated jobs along their career path. Participants' lived experiences related to their undergraduate socialization experiences and career trajectory defined the path. Participants spoke to overcoming adversity and continuing to work in student affairs to support

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students with similar identities. Specifically, Sara named being first-generation and its impact on her persistence in the profession as a result of being a connecting point for students navigating a university: "I was a first-gen student. So, I have made it my job to connect with people in student activities, and registrars, and financial aid to make sure I've got those pathways to connect those students that way." This identity also led to her persistence in the profession; she was so deeply entrenched in her financial investments, she could not leave the field.

Environments must allow staff to bring their full authentic selves to work. This includes opportunities to engage in self-reflection identity development and skill development and characteristics and traits that influence one's persistence in the profession. Staff spoke to investing in this profession and changing roles and institution to achieve values congruence.

Third, the peer environment extends beyond a single campus, and being in community with one another was an essence under the thematic findings of this study. Relationships with students, peers, and mentors may or may not support a healthy career in student affairs. Fourth, the individual staff member's overall experience both on and off campus interacts with the above three constructs as one persists over time, guided by their sense of purpose. The themes of passion, motivation, students, and the value of higher education's pursuit of equity aligned to the influence of purpose. The staff I interviewed all referenced students as the reason they entered and persist in student affairs and their unwavering commitment to higher education.

Reflecting on the bigger picture of the value of higher education and the perspective of what really matters daily helped participants persist. This study found it is harder for one to pick up and go and start anew when they feel rooted and connected in their current situation.

Specifically, when one is involved beyond their role on campus, in professional organizations, and in their communities, the perceived and real losses incurred inhibit one's departure from student affairs. Career investment and entrenchment is also related to the idea that staff simply do not want to leave their career. They do not want to give up, and they have done this work for so long in the profession, they cannot imagine what else they would (or could) do. Each of the

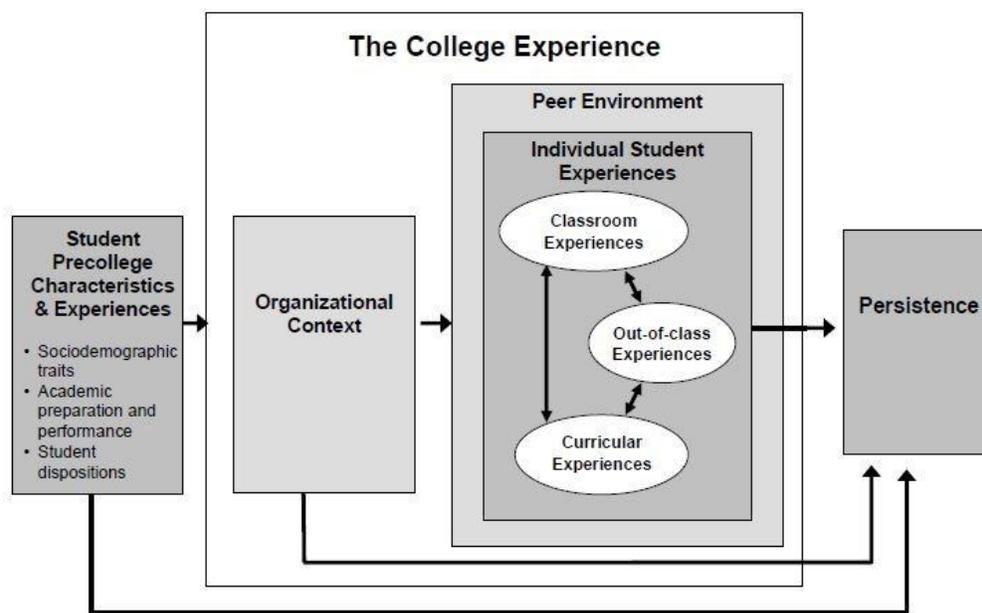
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participants expressed being unable to imagine themselves doing anything else, which spoke to passion and may also be rooted in the unknown, or fear. They have committed their lives to this work and spoke about feeling entrenched; they have traveled so far down their career path, they are unsure what else they could do. They also spoke of a feeling of letting down themselves or someone who believes in them. Blau (2003) speculated the greater the accumulated costs and investments, the greater sense of obligation or responsibility to one's occupation over time. This was corroborated when staff spoke to their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, passion, investment, and fulfillment as they have persisted over time.

As I compared the findings of this study on seasoned student affairs practitioners to Reason's (2009) conceptual framework on students (see Figure 1), I created an adapted model of interacting influences on seasoned student affairs staff persistence (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Model for Student Persistence

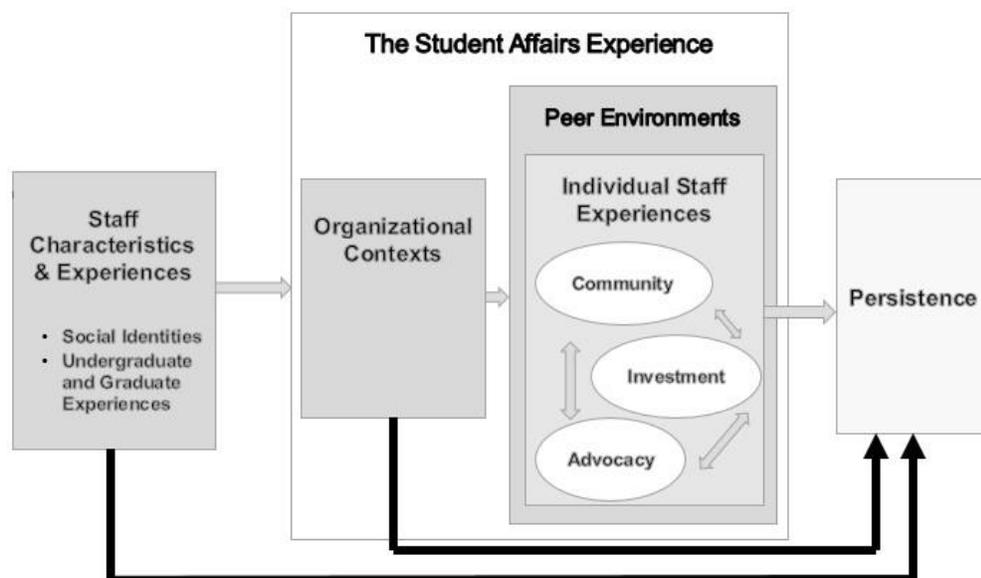


Note. A comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence. From "An Examination of Persistence Research Through the Lens of a Comprehensive Conceptual Framework," by R. D. Reason, 2009, *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), p. 661. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0098>

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Figure 2

Model for Student Affairs Staff Persistence



Note. An adapted conceptual framework of interacting influences on seasoned student affairs practice.

Adapted from “An Examination of Persistence Research Through the Lens of a Comprehensive Conceptual Framework,” by R. D. Reason, 2009, *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), p. 661.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0098>

This study explored the influential personal and professional experiences contributing to staff persistence. The findings of this study can inform professional associations to lead conversations about attrition and persistence. Staff must continue to remain motivated and resilient through adversity to persist in the profession. The high turnover rate resulting from high stress, low morale, and job dissatisfaction might be preventable if researchers continue to identify positive aspects of the profession and influences of why staff persist over time. The findings from this study suggest strategies for implementation throughout socialization experiences in graduate preparation programs, employee orientation and development, and professional associations and networks to ultimately further persistence. These implications will also contribute to the organizational wellbeing of colleges and universities. Ideally, these

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findings will have positive persistence implications to challenge the burnout rate among newer and seasoned professionals.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Staff

Based on the data from this study, I found student affairs staff who persist maintain some related behaviors and attitudes. From the essences of the findings in this study, I suggest three considerations for practical application: (a) find community, (b) celebrate investment, and (c) advocate.

Find Community

Student affairs is a relational profession, and staff cannot work in isolation. A community is one foundation for persistence in higher education and seemingly more accessible and perhaps easier to maintain with evolving digital social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn. Participants named their supportive network of meaningful and influential relationships with self, students, peers, and mentors as positive impacts on their careers.

Professional development opportunities must not only focus on learning and skill development but also include vocational, identity, and mentor development. Student affairs practitioners can learn from the environments and conditions they try to create for students and apply those contextually for staff as well. Many professional development opportunities are available for free or at low cost and not dependent on institutional financial resources. Seeking development also helps staff embrace the notion they are all teachers and learners in a global network of co-constructors of knowledge and practice.

University campuses have opportunities for experiences beyond specific and often limiting job responsibilities. Participants spoke to their investments and responsibilities on committees and in their outside-of-work communities, which instill a sense of community and obligation to stay in the profession. Due to the nature of student affairs work, staff must find ways to strive for balance to reduce stress.

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Celebrate Investment

Staff are meaningful educators contributing to the creation of a just society; the data from this study indicates the importance of celebrating their efforts at the college/university and in the greater community. Finding balance with commitments outside of work helped participants calibrate their overall perspective. It is crucial staff understand how to navigate political and stressful work environments to minimize any negative impact. Participants also encouraged peers to discover what and what not to tolerate. Additionally, people noted how keeping physical and emotional reminders of why staff do this work can inspire them to keep going. Participants discussed prioritizing self-care, mindfulness, and/or wellness are also tools to center perspective.

I believe it is important staff discover ways to focus on the student experience and keep reminders of the contributions and impact through reflections or artifacts. The student affairs profession is a meaningful vocational choice but also a difficult occupation. Remembering the learning and programmatic outcomes staff hope students achieve can provide inspiration to continue creating those conditions. I believe from my analysis of the data that positioning oneself to keep a strong sense of purpose focused on students and student learning will far outweigh the negative attributes of the work.

Staff in this study who have committed to the profession have worked in several jobs, functional roles, and regions. Many have overcome doubt and wonder if the “grass is greener” outside of the profession. As one matures and progresses in the field, they may find many avenues to pivot to without leaving the higher education sector. I assert there seems to be a tipping point where once a staff member has persisted this far, they will continue and see satisfaction, perks, and fulfillment in the work.

Advocate

From my experience, many new or younger professionals cite long hours, including nights and weekends, as contributing to their burnout in the profession. Student affairs

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professionals must be honest and diligent in socializing new professionals and adapting collegiate environments to meet the needs of Generation Z and Millennial staff. Engaging in flexible work arrangements will help student affairs become a healthy and long-term professional career choice while enabling them to meet the needs of their students. Professional associations setting vision and promoting bold, radical change, such as the ACPA Strategic Imperative on Racial Justice and Decolonization, inspire staff to contribute to a common goal.

Authenticity means different things to different people, identities, and systems. Staff must find their voice and live their truth as they are able and find community and work environments that promote holistic wellbeing. For example, I have asked my staff to try to bring their whole selves to work and not their work into their whole selves. In other words, it is okay to be holistic in our work environment, and, conversely, one does not need to take their work into their life outside of work. Striking this healthy balance is important and necessary to persist in this field.

Limitations

Each professional has a unique journey. I inquired into the descriptive experiences of four seasoned student affairs practitioners who have experienced the phenomenon of persistence in the profession. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “The more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes, and the overall essence of the experience for all participants” (p. 153). However, I wanted to seek the essence of persistence across diverse participants to intentionally reflect the population of the student affairs profession.

I have experienced the hierarchy of the profession result in an organic exodus due to the limited number of jobs available as one advances, limiting the participant pool. Also, soliciting participants via membership in a professional association potentially indicated deeper career commitment, as I believe professional development is often related to professional identity and persistence. Additionally, participants who volunteered for this study may have had an

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increased willingness to share their professional journey more than staff who did not want to be interviewed.

The conceptual framework suggests one has experiences and characteristics influencing persistence, resulting in a scope that seeks to understand the phenomenon. These interviews captured a snapshot into the experiences, intersections between them, and the essence beneath the description rather than an exhaustive account of the influences.

Participants may not have felt comfortable offering honest or negative details on career entrenchment that impact why they stay, such as feeling trapped, fear of the unknown in another profession, lack of clarity in their future, etc. Participants may have also feared offering critical narratives, such as combating institutional systems including racism, the promotion of white supremacy culture, and colonization, if they suspected any identifiable information may be released to come back to harm them in their current role or in the future. Based on the academic time of year in which the interviews were conducted (Winter 2019), participants may have had various salient identities and affinities to their work, which may have affected their attitude toward persistence in that specific, seasonal moment in time. In other words, mid-academic year and seasonal factors, including weather and minimal sunlight, may have hindered a participant's interview responses.

Another limitation is my interpretations during memoing and coding the data were unique to this study and inherently biased based on my salient identities and lenses. My interpretations were based on my own lived experiences in higher education, particularly since I have persisted as well. However, I managed my interpretation bias by reviewing the transcripts rigorously to be confident participants were listened to and offered their own lived experiences in response to the questions I asked. Adhering to the strict coding method and being in community with participants by soliciting feedback and member checking was imperative to establish credibility.

Another limitation is study repeatability. By using purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews, repeating this exact study is simply not possible. These results are a deep

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interpretation of the interacting themes and essences undergirding the phenomenon of persistence lived by several seasoned student affairs practitioners.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers must look at why staff continue to stay in the profession and suggest innovative ways to retain talent. Professionals in our field must reflect on how student affairs is or is not evolving and evaluate the needs of staff on college and university campuses. As I conducted this study, I documented ideas for future study as they arose, beginning with the need to seek to understand the persistence of particular demographics, such as staff of color, first-generation college graduates, and LGBTQIA+ staff. Researchers could explore specific undergraduate experiences (or lack of), various functional areas and roles, titles and affiliated involvement, and institution types. Researchers could explore the impact of supervisors on persistence, or family obligations that may result in greater commitment or entrenchment. One could interview staff who are not in student affairs, such as dining service, facilities, and library services, to discern what about college environments and cultures contribute to career persistence. Another demographic to explore are staff who do not work on college campuses, including sorority/fraternity headquarters staff, consulting organizations, and professional associations. Future researchers could study a comparison of higher education with other helping professions to see if the phenomenon of persistence is similar or different. Researchers could seek to understand resilience, trauma-informed practices, and overcoming burnout. Further studies could offer insight into any incentivized staff persistence compared to the academic tenure process, as faculty retention is structured quite differently and may offer insights into persistence in the field.

Some potential questions for future study include:

- Is there a generational difference on persistence in the profession depending on when one entered the field?

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- Do certain undergraduate experiences or functional roles result in longer persistence or earlier burnout?
- For staff who exit, what would have made them stay longer?
- Is persistence related to career satisfaction?
- How do staff develop a sense of belonging?
- Is an individual's intent to persist affected by institutional staff retention efforts?
- What role does identity play in vocation?
- Is there a tipping point or threshold number of years where staff choose to stay and will not depart?
- Why do the most senior student affairs officers stay in the profession?

These are several options for future research studies that could positively effect change in the student affairs profession, which is an important topic to continue to understand.

Final Thoughts

Colleges and universities employ talented staff to educate and support students. The seasoned student affairs professionals interviewed in this study have persisted for years, citing their strong sense of (a) why (i.e., purpose and impact); (b) how (i.e., relationships with others); and (c) what (i.e., entrenchment) as three positive influences of their decisions to persist in the profession. Beyond these larger themes are the deep essences of (a) why: advocating toward an equitable world; (b) how: being in community; and (c) what: investing deeply in this chosen vocation, interacting with characteristics, experiences, contexts, and environments toward persistence. The findings from this study suggest strategies for implementation throughout socialization experiences in graduate preparation programs, employee orientation and development, and professional associations and networks to ultimately further persistence. Applicable considerations include finding community through support networks and professional development; celebrating investments by centering perspective and recognizing impact; and

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advocating by challenging norms, being whole, and educating for change. This study informs the field about increasing staff engagement and persistence in higher education and student affairs by promoting opportunities for vocational growth and development, fostering supportive networks, and enabling deep reflection on a sense of purpose.

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