“It Was More About the Functional Area”: Pursuing and Persisting in Student Affairs Community Engagement Positions

THESIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this constructivist narrative study was to explore the prior experiences that have influenced new student affairs professionals to pursue positions focused on promoting community engagement as well as factors that contribute to their desire to leave or persist in this functional area. The research questions guiding this study were: 1) What are the prior life experiences of new student affairs professionals that have influenced their decision to hold a position focused on engaging students with the local community through co-curricular volunteerism, community service, or service-learning? 2) What factors influence individuals’ desire to leave or persist in these positions? Data collection occurred through three separate interviews with four participants, each focusing on a separate timeframe of the new professionals life experiences. Additional data was collected through document analysis, including participants’ position descriptions, resumes, and cover letters. Data was analyzed using the content-categorical method of narrative analysis to identify commons themes and experiences. Findings from this study indicate the influence of service involvement and related leadership experiences during students’ undergraduate education, when decisions were made regarding specialization within the field, as well as socialization to the functional area.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the factors that have led to the formation of student affairs professionals focused specifically on community engagement. First, I briefly review the development and diversification of the student affairs profession. Following this, I review the rise of service-learning in higher education. Finally, I relate the role and importance of student affairs professionals in service-learning programs before discussing the methodology with which the study was conducted. I conclude by highlighting the significance of this investigation to student affairs practice and community engagement work within higher education.

Development of Student Affairs as a Profession

Throughout the colonial period of the United States, colleges and universities were largely concerned with the academic preparation of their students (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). During this time, what is now considered student affairs was in the form of faculty acting in loco parentis, or serving as parents to the students during their academic study. Largely, this took the form of faculty being held responsible for the intellectual and moral development of the students (Melear, 2003). In the mid-1800s co-curricular fraternal organizations began to develop and the first positions dedicated exclusively to campus life and students were created in the latter half of the 17th century.
Often these positions were created out of a need to manage disciplinary action against students (Dungy & Gordon, 2011).

Diversification of Student Affairs

The proliferation of student affairs practices and programs considered common today began in the early 1900’s with the establishment of student government associations. Federal mandates, such as the Morrill Acts in the 1800’s and laws later developed to facilitate student access, enhanced the ability of the American public to pursue higher education (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). As the student population grew, the number of functions and roles staff members were expected to fill expanded as well. The increasing specialization within staff roles was reflected in the creation of a number of focused professional organizations in the early 1900’s (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). This specialization has continued to evolve as higher education experiences innovation and change to meet the emerging needs of students.

In the only relatively recent study directly examining the reasons individuals choose to enter student affairs as a profession, Taub and McEwen (2006) adopted a quantitative approach, surveying a national sample of enrolled higher education master’s students. The researchers found that what drew these students to pursue student affairs was the encouragement from a specific individual, the possibility to work on a college campus, and the desire to engage in work that was personally fulfilling (Taub & McEwen, 2006). Although the findings from this study are useful in framing the reasons individuals may consider student affairs as a profession, the lack of specificity ignores the
vast differences of individuals’ roles and responsibilities in different functional areas of the field.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) within student affairs regularly publishes guides outlining the research-based standards for a variety of functional areas within student affairs. In the updated list of CAS professional standards for 2012, the organization provides standards for 43 functional areas. These include campus activities, dining services programs, parent and family programs, as well as veterans and military programs and services (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2012). Another of these functional areas is service-learning programs.

Rise of Service-Learning and Community Engagement

Although the concept of civic engagement has long been an aspect of the higher education mission, the increase in the provision of resources, grants, and research outlets specific to community service did not occur en masse until the early 1990’s (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). Scholars have suggested the development of service-learning stems from a period of innovation in the 1960’s and 1970’s, during which time a number of new pedagogical practices emerged based in part on aspects of Dewey’s core philosophical assumptions (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). Others argue the service-learning movement was built in part with the social history and fabric of the African American community as a model (Stevens, 2003).

More recently, scholars have pointed to critiques of higher education, including the perceived lack of quality in undergraduate education and disengagement of faculty
members with their teaching responsibilities as contributing to the rise of service-learning (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). In the academic context, service-learning pedagogy has been viewed as a means to reinvigorate teaching undergraduate students the material related to their chosen discipline. Similarly, student affairs professionals have responded to these critiques by engaging students in community service and reflection as a means to promote affective development and learning (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). As the practice of engaging students in their local community has grown, higher education institutions have responded by dedicating resources and progressively institutionalizing community engagement, resulting in an increase in the number of professionals dedicated to coordinating these programs. As this proliferation of community engagement has been welcomed into the undergraduate curriculum and co-curricular experience at many institutions, there exist some colleges and universities that rely on grant-funded or short-term positions to coordinate community service-learning efforts. Although this may contribute to a sense for some that community engagement is temporary, such a model has been used to successfully demonstrate a need for an institutionalized and permanent position (e.g. Chadwick & Pawlowski, 2007).

Role of Student Affairs Professionals in Service-Learning Programs

Within co-curricular service-learning programs, student affairs professionals may play a number of roles. Specifically, according to Jacoby (n.d.), community service directors often must balance performing evaluation and assessment, applying student learning theory, staying current on trends in higher education and local communities, as well as maintaining a personal commitment to the public good. By examining sample
position descriptions available through Campus Compact, a national organization
dedicated to promoting community engagement in higher education, the variety of
responsibilities shared across these roles are highlighted. Common job functions include
staff members coordinating with community partners to determine service projects, lead
students engaging in community service, effectively use reflection to assist students in
processing their experiences, conduct assessment and program evaluation, as well as
supervise student interns or staff who may assist in these efforts (Campus Compact, n.d.).

Much of the research on service-learning, both curricular and co-curricular,
advances the practice’s ability as a philosophy and pedagogy to assist students in
challenging their existing stereotypes, uncovering issues of power and privilege, and
learning more about their place in society. Gilbride-Brown (2008) argued that because of
these findings and accompanying silences surrounding certain aspects of service-learning,
the practice has developed a “victory narrative” (p. 2). As a field, the benefits of service-
learning are touted with limited acknowledgement of the ways in which service-learning
can be damaging for students and/or the community, and the challenging nature of
engaging students in these difficult conversations.

Some research has been done exploring the issue of conversations with students
regarding their positions of privilege. For example, in an article regarding White faculty
perceptions and responses to difficult conversations around race in the classroom,
researchers found that even experienced faculty members were anxious about these
topics. Common fears were losing control of their classroom, the emotionally charged
nature of these conversations, as well as ineffective management of these classroom
dialogues (Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009). Ignoring or ineffectively handling such topics can negatively influence the potential learning of all students, both within the classroom and during co-curricular programs.

Being able to successfully facilitate challenging dialogues with students around issues of power, privilege, and social identities requires student affairs professionals to have the appropriate skills and competencies. Knowledge of social justice, equity, and diversity as well as the ability to provide issue-specific probing questions or resources, effective counseling skills, and an ability to direct and foster beneficial group dynamics are a few of the potential areas in which professionals should be prepared (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2010).

Within the service-learning context, dialogues on race, power, and privilege are common, especially when engaging students in antifoundational service-learning. Antifoundational service-learning asks students to question how power and voice are distributed in our society and trouble the “normalcy and neutrality” (Butin, 2010, p. 12) that often guide our daily existence. In this way, antifoundational service-learning requires students to question their notions of the world, viewing the experience as a way to engage students in “questioning answers rather than answering questions” (Butin, 2010, p. 63). Jones, Gilbride-Brown, and Gasior ski’s (2005) profiles of student resistance to service-learning based in social justice provides some evidence that, in the short term, not all students develop a more advanced understanding of the complexities of power in society or even a more nuanced understanding of the development of
stereotypes. Longitudinal work around the effects of service-learning and how these experiences may linger and resurface later in a student’s life however, is missing from the literature.

Effective service-learning is not only achieved through student affairs professionals properly handling student actions and responses to their community service, but also through interactions with community agencies. Through conversations with community partners, Stoecker and Tryon (2009) found that often students engaging in service-learning may lack basic training, be a poor match for the organization, and drain limited resources available to small not-for-profit agencies. In coordinating these experiences, student affairs professionals must also balance the needs and expectations of the community agencies they strive to serve through their work. To this end, longevity and continuity within individual relationships may be beneficial (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Given the challenges of coordinating service-learning and community engagement, it is important to explore how individuals come to hold these positions.

**Decision to Pursue Community Engagement Positions**

Little research exists within the field of student affairs regarding the reasons individuals choose to become student affairs professionals and the literature that does exist is mainly quantitative in nature and focused on the profession as a whole (e.g., Taub & McEwen, 2006). A number of factors were identified through prior research which prompt individuals to consider the field, such as their ability to work on a college campus, the challenging nature of the work, and the opportunities to foster student development (Taub & McEwen, 2006). In the present study, I will draw on broader
career decision-making theories to research the ways in which individuals choose to pursue not only student affairs, but a specific functional area within it.

Brown’s (2004) model of post-college decision-making outlines a potential series of actions and processes that occur during students’ decision process regarding their post-college employment. Key within this model are students’ prior life experiences which have influenced their orientation to learning and their decision to pursue certain experiences one they begin their undergraduate education. Social cognitive career theory (Hackett & Betz, 1981) applied the concept of self-efficacy to individuals’ career decisions. Included in this theory are concepts related to how well individuals perform related tasks and the praise received when individuals engage in related behavior, among other factors (Hackett & Betz, 1981). Literature related to concepts introduced above will be explored in depth in Chapter 2.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this constructivist narrative inquiry is to explore the prior life experiences of student affairs professionals that have influenced their desire to apply for and persist in community engagement positions in higher education institutions. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are the prior life experiences of new student affairs professionals that have influenced their decision to hold a position focused on engaging students with the local community through co-curricular volunteerism, community service, or service-learning?

2. What factors influence individuals’ desire to leave or persist in these positions?
Overview of Methodology

A constructivist narrative approach serves as the framework for this study to explore the life experiences of new student affairs professionals currently holding community engagement positions. Further, in light of these past experiences, participants were also asked to share how their expectations were met or challenged in their current position in an effort to understand factors which influence a desire to persist in co-curricular community engagement work in higher education. Four participants were recruited through the use of purposeful, criteria based sampling through two national higher education and student affairs list-serv.

Narrative research “is a way of understanding experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20) often referred to as a process of “retrospective meaning making” (Chase, 2005, p. 656) for those being interviewed. The participants were interviewed three times, with each interview covering a different time period in the participants’ lives. Additionally, appropriate documents, such as resumes, cover letters, and position descriptions, were collected as available and reviewed, providing another method of data collection which is able to capture the prior experiences of participants. Further, as these documents would have been created during the job search process for the participants, they were able to offer some contextualization for the participants thought process at that time.

Through sharing the critical events (Webster & Mertova, 2007) and stories which have influenced the evolving conception of their career path, I paid specific attention to the elements of the stories shared by the participants, such as who was involved, what the
influential events and experiences were, as well as the chronology of the experiences. By focusing on critical events, I acknowledge that narrative research is “event driven” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 71). Key moments and experiences common to the participants were identified following Leiblich, Tuval-Machia, and Zilber’s (1998) categorical-content analysis method. This entails a careful process of reading and rereading the interview transcripts and available documents to identify common subthemes within the data and further analyzing the content that falls within each subtheme. Analysis focused on identifying those experiences that participants indicated were influential in directing them towards student affairs and community engagement positions specifically. Additionally, the prior life experiences of the participants likely resulted in developing expectations of their current position, and as such this study explored how these expectations were met or challenged.

Significance of Study

Developing an understanding of the prior life experiences of student affairs professionals in this functional area shed light on how these individuals have prepared to anticipate and approach the challenges associated with their professional responsibilities. Further, the present exploration of professionals’ expectations examines the factors that contribute to the stress and struggles of student affairs professionals in this functional area. While considered entry-level positions, the continuity of professionals in these roles is an important consideration given the relationships they develop and facilitate external to the university.
Further, with the increased specialization of student affairs professionals, the potential for the variety of ways in which individuals come to pursue careers in student affairs increases. Limited existing research (e.g. Taub & McEwen, 2006) on the factors that lead individuals to pursue the field generally ignore the uniqueness and variety within different functional areas. While this study only explored one functional area, the findings are able to confirm, deepen, or challenge earlier work.

Summary

Examining the prior life experiences of student affairs professionals engaged in the local community has the potential to inform the nuances of recruiting, preparing, and retaining effective practitioners to this functional area. Literature on career decision-making constructs, student affairs professionals, and motivations to engage in community service informed this constructivist narrative study and will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Two. The purpose of this study is to explore those prior life experiences that have influenced individuals to pursue and persist in these positions. This investigation will contribute to the limited research available on student affairs professionals generally and specifically within the functional area of community engagement.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Through this study I sought to explore the prior life experiences of student affairs professionals who hold positions that foster student and community engagement in higher education through a constructivist narrative methodology. Understanding the reasons student affairs professionals choose to specialize in community engagement positions necessitates a review of literature to inform the study. There is a dearth of literature on student affairs professionals that accounts for the specificity of the different functional areas. Therefore, to frame the exploration and understanding of the life experiences of student affairs professionals that have prompted a consideration of positions focused on community engagement, literature on a number of related topics will be discussed.

In this chapter, I will review literature related to career decision-making generally and of college students specifically, as many student affairs professionals first consider student affairs as a potential career while in college (Taub & McEwen, 2006). Further, literature related to career decisions of women will be reviewed, reflecting data suggesting that the majority of new student affairs professionals are female (Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloan, 2006).

Additionally, Learning Reconsidered, a foundational document in the field, notes that learning is “a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development” (emphasis in original, American College Personnel Association and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators,
Learning Reconsidered represents a shift in the predominant view of the field, from a conglomeration of individuals assisting students in their development to a unified profession focused on contributing to students’ holistic learning. As such, it is appropriate to review those motivations to enter the field of education generally. I will then review the limited research related to the reasons individuals choose to enter student affairs specifically, followed by a discussion of critical issues related to student affairs professionals.

After outlining research relevant to the decision to enter the field of student affairs, I will discuss those reasons individuals and college students may choose to engage in community service. I will then provide an overview of the literature exploring the reasons faculty adopt a service-learning pedagogy in their courses in an effort to frame the justification of including community engagement in higher education. Reviewing this literature with an understanding of student affairs professionals as educators will be useful in outlining those reasons why individuals may be drawn to this functional area of the field.

Career Decision-Making

Research indicates that most students in student affairs graduate programs enroll shortly after the undergraduate experience; one study found that over 68% of student affairs master’s students (N= 300) were under 27 years old (Taub & McEwen, 2006). Another study of recent student affairs master’s students (N=90) found the average age to be approximately 25 years old in a national sample (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Therefore, it is important to provide an overview of models related to career decision
theory, with a focus on college students. Much of the literature specific to students focuses on the experiences of certain identity groups such as women (e.g. Allen & Taylor, 2006; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005), Puerto Rican students (e.g. Corkin, Arbona, Coleman, & Ramierz, 2008), students involved in specific programs such as TRiO (e.g. Greier-Reed & Ganuza, 2012), and the influence of external factors in the decision making process (e.g. Duffy & Dik, 2009).

First, I will outline literature related to the factors individuals consider when deciding on a career path, such as external factors that may influence their decision. Following this, I will discuss career self-efficacy and social cognitive career theory before reviewing two models of career decision-making. I will then discuss literature on motivations to enter the broader education field, before presenting those issues faced by student affairs professionals, community service, and the intersections of the reviewed literature.

Using a phenomenological approach, researchers uncovered six themes relating to how individuals make decisions related to changing their career (Amudson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010). Their research points to the importance of relationships and an acknowledgement that “career and work are embedded in relational life and must be considered within the relational contexts and life roles within which they occur” (p. 340). Encompassed in the relational life theme is the importance of role models and mentors in influencing career choice, specifically that “deciders made career decisions to be like valued others” (Amudson, et al., 2010, p. 347).
Other themes discussed in Amundson, et al. (2010) included the importance of personal meaning and economic realities, including balancing between individuals’ desires and needs. Further, some participants chose careers that aligned with their personal values and ideals, while others chose jobs that afforded them the ability to pursue engagement outside of work they felt was meaningful. Although not specific to college students or new professionals, the participants in this study ranged from those individuals considered new professionals to those well established in their careers (Amundson, et al., 2010).

In a study which explored factors related to career decision-making challenges of undergraduate students spanning across all years, researchers uncovered that the main challenges faced by the students in the study was a general indecisiveness (Gati & Amir, 2010), suggesting that students had not yet successfully reflected on their prior experiences in an effort to begin to narrow down directions for their future. Gati and Amir (2010) also noted the prevalence of dysfunctional beliefs, which Kleiman et al. (2004) characterized as those thoughts that are pessimistic, including “irrational expectations about the career decision-making process” (p. 315). Gati and Amir (2010) further discussed gender differences related to career indecision, namely that women face a general indecisiveness while men exhibited greater levels of lacking motivation and dysfunctional beliefs. The least significant difficulties college students faced were those related to external conflicts (Gati & Amir, 2010), such as the desires of family members, although other research suggests that later in the lifespan, external influences play a critical role in the decision-making process (Duffy & Dik, 2009).
External Influences

In their analysis of available literature related to external influences on career decision-making throughout the lifespan, Duffy and Dik (2009) identified a variety of factors that influence this process. In contrast to Gati and Amir’s (2010) study, Duffy and Dik (2009) asserted that the “most significant category” (p. 32) includes those related to family needs and expectations, ranging from those professions that are supported by parental figures to the time and quality certain professions allow for parents to care for their children. They also found that family expectations vary by gender and race. Additionally, the provision of emotional and financial support as well as resources and networking opportunities differed depending on the race and gender of the participant (Duffy & Dik, 2009).

Other external factors identified by Duffy and Dik (2009) included life circumstances, or “uncontrollable situations, events, and conditions that occur at an individual and societal level” (p. 33), including poverty and stigmatization, providing the effects of Hurricane Katrina as an example. Additionally, they identified the motivation to be of service to the external world as a factor that can influence the career paths of individuals when combined with certain external factors. They cited evidence from news outlets documenting the individuals who left their jobs indefinitely to assist after September 11th as support for this category, but also asserted that being exposed to a social issue indirectly (e.g. through watching a documentary) may prompt individuals to consider a different career (Duffy & Dik, 2009).

Models of Career Choice

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Two models regarding career choice were applicable in advancing an understanding of why individuals are motivated to pursue positions in student affairs: Brown’s (2004) model of college student career decision-making and career self-efficacy and cognitive social career theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Brown (2004) outlined a process of decision-making in which students engage to determine their post-college plan. SCCT connects concepts of self-efficacy with outcomes expectations and interests to provide a framework for the emergence of career interests (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Although this study is concerned with those individuals with master’s degrees, as college is the time during which many individuals become aware of the profession (Taub & McEwen, 2006), exploring career decision models and relevant career decision literature focused on college students is appropriate.

**Model of College Student Career Decision-Making**

Brown (2004) applied a model of wisdom development to study the process of students’ post-college decisions. This model posited that students’ orientation to learning influences the types of new experiences students have as well as their interactions with others. Brown explains individuals orientation to learning as “an individual’s expectation, preparedness, motivation, and attitude when one interfaces with activities and people; an individual’s general orientation to life, the whole college experience, and specific situations encountered” (p. 376). Depending on a student’s orientation to learning, they may choose to engage in different activities throughout their time in college, which in turn influences their career decision-making process along with their interpersonal relationships and past experiences (Brown, 2004).
Of specific interest are the experiences that influenced students’ decision-making. In Brown’s (2004) study of college students career decision processes, these included course selections, activities both on and off campus such as internships and employment, as well as other activities that afforded students new perspectives, interest discovery, self-reflection, and challenge. Further, interactions that were most influential for students were those that were both challenging and supportive, provided useful feedback, involved role models respected by the students, and allowed students the opportunity to influence others (Brown, 2004). Positioning these past experiences as a starting point, Brown then used his findings to outline a career decision-making process for college students.

The decision-making process included aspects such as “taking stock, developing criteria, making on-board adjustments, connecting to opportunities, and narrowing options/making a decision” (p. 384). While taking stock, students reflect on past experiences to uncover salient themes and patterns. Students in this study also noted that there were a number of factors that were involved in their decision-making process, such as financial issues, perceived ability to find a job, difficulty of finding work, either in a given location or field, and their ability to find opportunities in their chosen field. Participants connected to opportunities in various ways; some students actively sought out ways to enhance their available options while others simply waited for opportunities to present themselves. In summarizing how students make their final decision by narrowing down their options, Brown (2004) noted that students often engage in “self-assessment, reflecting on options, synthesizing multiple perspectives, and consideration of consequences” (p. 385). It is likely that as students engage in reflection and assess
their options, they are able to incorporate the thoughts and feelings of parents, friends, and partners into their decision-making process.

Further, although Duffy and Dik’s (2009) study of external influences in career decision-making was focused on older adults, factors such as life circumstances or natural disasters have a corollary in Brown’s (2004) model in this self-assessment phase. Specifically, these life events or external influences may produce similar effects to those student experiences that provide new perspectives and opportunities for self-reflection. However, an explicit acknowledgement of how external factors influence students’ decision-making process is not included in this model. Examining the literature related to the experiences of college women provides further support for the role of external influences on the career-decision making process for this population.

**Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Hackett and Betz (1981) were the first to apply Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy to the career decision-making process and in doing so generated a theoretical model exploring the effects of differences in self-efficacy, specifically between genders. Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) defined self-efficacy as “a dynamic set of self-beliefs that are specific to particular performance domains and that interact complexly with other person, behavior and contextual factors” (p. 83). Hackett and Betz’s (1981) model identified four sources of information that contributes to one’s sense of self-efficacy as it relates to career choices. These included 1) how well an individual may do at performing related tasks, 2) the salience and frequency of observing others perform and succeed at specific careers, 3) an individual’s emotional response (e.g. anxiety) to engaging in a specific
career associated task, and 4) praise and encouragement in an individual's ability to engage in related behaviors (Hackett & Betz, 1981).

Social cognitive career theory, developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), expanded Hackett and Betz’s (1981) original application of self-efficacy to career choice. The authors noted that self-efficacy both directly and indirectly affects career choice goals. SCCT holds that individuals are more likely to enter fields that are congruent with their primary interest areas. An individual’s sense of self-efficacy and expectation of outcomes contributes to a determination of their interest areas. Similarly, an individual’s prior learning experiences influence their sense of self-efficacy and outcomes expectations across a wide variety of activities (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

Additionally, SCCT holds that learning experiences are determined by emerging interests, which help to guide an individual’s considerations of future activities. By increasing exposure to an activity, the likelihood increases that one will later engage in and practice aspects related to that activity. Through practicing particular behaviors, individuals can come to determine their level of success in a particular domain. This will in turn influence their level of self-efficacy and outcomes expectations (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). To correlate to Brown’s (2004) model, as individuals engage in new experiences, they also enter a process of self-reflection, likely identifying their perceived level of success, challenge, and determination of willingness to attempt a similar experience or behavior again. As individuals are able to focus on those domains in which they feel most prepared to enter professionally, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) noted
that the creation of career related goals are most likely to be effective if they are “explicit, attainable, and proximal” (p. 93).

In further applying career self-efficacy to Brown’s (2004) model of career decision-making, it is evident that the four sources of information each have a place in influencing the career decision-making process. Specifically, students orientation to learning, experiences, and relationships all likely encompass vicarious learning experiences, feedback and support from trusted others, and the willingness to try new experiences to determine one’s level of success. For example, Brown notes that individual’s interactions with others, such as support, feedback, and respect influence both those experiences individuals are willing to have and the process by which students decide on the post-college plans, which correlates with Hackett and Betz’s (1981) explanation of the role of praise and encouragement from others.

Since its development, social cognitive career theory has been applied to and studied within a variety of populations. Of interest to the study are those explorations of gender differences and individuals’ commitment to social justice. Williams and Subich (2006) found that individuals’ learning experiences may differ depending on one’s gender, affecting self-efficacy and outcome expectations, thereby explaining some of the observed differences in career choice between genders. Further research examining gender role norms found that conformity along these lines is more prevalent in certain career domains than in others (Tokar, Thompson, Plaufcan, & Williams, 2007).

Social cognitive career theory has also been applied to college students’ level of commitment to social justice. Researchers have found that self-efficacy played a greater
role in determining interest when compared to outcome expectations. Further, an interest in social justice was directly related to students’ commitment to participate in future activities related to social justice. A unique finding of this study was the role of social support in fostering an interest and commitment to social justice engagement, or advocating for equality, redistributing resources, or reducing power imbalances. In the realm of social justice advocacy, this study suggested that lower social barriers, or experiencing fewer negative comments or discouragement about initial involvement in social justice efforts from friends and family had a higher effect than previous studies of SCCT have suggested for other careers or vocations (Miller et al., 2009). Specifically, for those students who did not receive as many negative messages about their involvement with social justice, they experienced an increase in their expectations of positive outcomes regarding their involvement in social justice work, which resulted in a greater commitment to engaging with social justice.

Career Decision-Making of Women

Over 70% of respondents in a study of student affairs professionals who had been in the field for less than five years were female (Cilente et al., 2006). As a result, it is appropriate to review literature that relates specifically to the career decision process of women. Throughout the literature focusing on women and career decisions, agency and self-efficacy are two often-cited concepts. In their review of female college students, Creamer and Laughlin (2005) used self-authorship as a framework to determine who influenced their participants’ career decision-making process and to what level these women relied on other individuals for advice and direction.
Most of the women interviewed cited parents and other family members as providing the most influence on the development of their career interests (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005). For many of the women in this study, their reliance on these individuals for advice and approval placed them in the earliest stages of self-authorship. The authors posited that for those women who are not yet self-authored, the authority and trust they have in their parents can prove to be more important than those who may have more knowledge about the variety of career options, such as advisors and faculty mentors (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005). The focus of this study was on the influence of interactions with others aspect of Brown’s (2004) model. The findings raise the question of whether aspects of this model are more influential for certain individuals.

In a similar study, Allen and Taylor (2006) applied the work of Belenky et al. to women in their senior year as they considered their post-college plans. They identified a group of searchers and pathmakers in their participants and subdivided each into two additional groups, lost and finders, and naturalists and tourists, respectively. Those whom they placed in the lost group were often overwhelmed with the decisions to be made and focused on others in their life who would be impacted by their career choices, often stating that their decisions would be decided through the approval of family members and partners (Allen & Taylor, 2006).

Naturalists were those students who had developed a clear passion for their area of focus, often using available resources such as elective credits to explore new fields, and sought faculty members’ advice. Tourists, while they valued the advice of advisors and faculty, wanted more directive suggestions. Interestingly, tourists were the women
who most frequently noted getting married and having children was their immediate goal (Allen & Taylor, 2006).

The findings from these studies suggest that quantitative studies such as Gati and Amir (2010) are not able to fully portray the challenges faced by different subgroups of the student population. For the women interviewed in these studies, the influence of family and relationships on their decision-making process is an important consideration. Just as examining the decision-making process of women is useful in understanding what leads individuals to enter student affairs, reviewing those factors that prompt a decision to enter education will contribute to an understanding of the ways in which individuals may come to enter student affairs.

Motivations to Enter Education

Much of the research on motivations to enter education has been conducted internationally, although the findings are still useful to more broadly understand what brings people to education. In a recent study exploring the link between individuals’ motivations to teach in the Netherlands and the length they intend to stay in the field, researchers found that female, pre-service teachers more often cited intrinsic adaptive motivations. These included motivations such as desiring competence and exploring an area of curiosity. Intrinsic adaptive motivations were associated with the intention to stay in the field for a longer period of time (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010).

In a quantitative survey examining almost 500 pre-service Australian teachers motivations to enter the profession, the factors deemed most important were individuals’ past experiences with teaching, a perceived ability to teach, the value of the career, and
ability to be influential in the lives of children and make a social contribution (Watts & Richardson, 2007, p. 191). Watt and Richardson (2008) further examined Australians’ motivations to teach in a later study. They found that the reasons those they classified as “highly engaged persisters” (p. 416) gave for wanting to teach were related to their earlier findings. Specifically, participants noted that the work was satisfying, provided the opportunity to work with and influence children, and an expressed belief that teaching is what they are “supposed to do” or their “calling” (Watts & Richardson, 2008, p. 417).

Duffy and Dik (2009) offered a definition of calling as:

An orientation toward a particular life domain, such as work, containing three dimensions: the experience of a transcendent summons originating beyond the self, the pursuit of activity within the work role as a source or extension of an individual's overall sense of purpose and meaningfulness in life, and viewing other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation. (p. 35)

Researchers have further explored the notion of a career as a calling, noting that there is some overlap between life satisfaction and having a calling or feeling as if an individual’s life has meaning (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010). For those college students who are faced with indecision or are considered lost, the absence of a calling may prompt them to consider post-college options that they deem convenient, afford them more time to explore options, and allow them to maintain the connections and life context that they feel is important as they move forward.
Finally, in a study of reasons graduates from elite American colleges enter the field of education, Tamir (2009) challenged the notion of teachers as a homogenous group. She offered a counter-story to the dominant narrative that women select this profession as a result of being pushed into teaching because of their gender, viewing the profession as a service that provides personal satisfaction, or as an “invaluable opportunity” (p. 527) for first generation students to join the ranks of the lower-middle class. Rather, Tamir found that often those students with the economic and social capital to study at elite universities are not drawn to teaching because of the economic stability. These students instead view teaching as a means of activism, advancing social justice, and challenging inequality, although she noted that gender roles continue to influence the decision to teach (Tamir, 2009). As the literature on motivations to enter education indicates, individuals are often drawn to positions that foster student learning as a result of both internal beliefs and values as well as external relationships. Research on reasons individuals have provided for choosing to enter student affairs further addresses some of these factors.

Pursuing a Career in Student Affairs

Not much has been written about why individuals choose to enter student affairs, a field dedicated to promoting student learning that occurs outside, or in conjunction with, course-based education within higher education, and much of the early research has severe limitations (Taub & McEwen, 2006). In exploring those prior experiences that prompt individuals to consider student affairs as a career, it is helpful to first review the general characteristics of those in the field. The American College Personnel Association
(ACPA) found that new student affairs professionals, as cited above, were over 70% were female (Cilente et al., 2006). Additionally, 84% were White and over 87% held a master’s degree.

Research on student affairs master’s students has indicated some of the reasons individuals entered student affairs (Taub & McEwen, 2006). The most common answers provided in Taub and McEwen’s (2006) quantitative study were the ability to work on a college campus (72.7%), the fulfilling nature of the work (72%), to provide services and programs for students (57.3%), provide opportunities to foster student development (57.3%), the educational environment (49%), variety of opportunities (50.7%), and the challenging nature of the work (35.7%). Further, over 80% of the participants in the study noted that they had relationships with specific student affairs professionals who encouraged them to the field as a career option (Taub & McEwen, 2006).

An earlier study explored the question of what motivates individuals to pursue positions in student affairs by examining the reasons provided by master’s students at a single institution who entered their program between 1985 and 1989 (Hunter, 1992). Six situations or characteristics of the undergraduate experience were identified that prompted these individuals to consider a career in student affairs: encouragement by those already in the field (73%), critical incidents (79%), shared values (36%), others reactions to employment in the field (19%), uncertainty about the field as a career option (15%), and improving campus life (11%) (Hunter, 1992).

Other work, such as Magolda and Carnaghi’s (2004) collection of new professionals’ stories, captures indirectly individuals’ narratives of pursuing careers in
student affairs. For example, the voices of new professionals included in Magolda and Carnaghi’s edited volume provided varying reasons for focusing their first professional job search in a variety of ways. Some noted the general satisfying and tangible nature of working with students. Others referenced the specific functional areas that drew them to student affairs, while another referred only to her decision to not apply to a certain functional area (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004). Through the focus of these narratives on the role and importance of the functional areas within student affairs that the authors pursued, the narratives shared in this collection challenge the limited quantitative findings that have attempted to explain the reasons individuals choose to enter student affairs.

Some studies examining individuals’ motivations to pursue positions in student affairs are focused on the recruitment practices of college and universities to attract those individuals who have already decided to enter student affairs (e.g. Belch, Wilson, & Dunkel, 2009; Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Winston, Creamer, & Miller, 2001). Sandeen and Barr (2006) drew on older research to note that many student affairs professionals enter the field through reorganization, specialty areas (such as psychology or athletics), or unintentionally. In contrast, Belch, Wilson, and Dunkel (2009) found that institutions with a clear mission and which are honest about the challenges individuals will face in certain positions are more successful in their recruitment and retention of entry-level professionals. This suggests that successful student affairs professionals are drawn to the field through a personal connection with the mission of higher education.

Through these findings, the connection of reasons to pursue student affairs to the literature on career choice and motivations to teach is evident. Links to the education
literature can be seen in student affairs professionals’ desire to work in a specific context and with responsibilities that allow them to engage in holistic teaching for student development and learning. The importance of role models provides a link to the career decision literature, in that Amudson et al. (2010) noted the importance of role models and mentors in deciding on a career path. Further, studies examining the role of external influences in career decisions, while not explicitly mentioned in the literature on motivations to pursue student affairs, are be useful when exploring the motivations of participants in this study to apply to certain positions.

Finally, studies such as Tamir’s (2009) exploration of those studying education at elite universities, further identify limitations in Taub and McEwen’s (2006) research. This study serves as a reminder that there is variation within a group that is often referenced as a homogenous unit. To view student affairs professionals as a whole without exploring the different paths that these individuals have taken or the different areas of student affairs they wish to enter is to limit the ways in which the profession can be viewed and studied. Although research on motivations to enter student affairs is limited, the oft-cited high level of attrition in the field (Tull, Hirt, & Saunders, 2009, p. x) has led to a number of studies exploring career satisfaction within student affairs. As a related theme of this study is exploring how the experiences of new professionals have met their expectations, it is appropriate to review literature related to career satisfaction of student affairs professionals.

Career Satisfaction in Student Affairs
Estimates of attrition within student affairs have been suggested to be between 50% and 60%, predominately within the first five years individuals spend in the field (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006). In response, some researchers have attempted to explore those aspects of the profession that prompt individuals to consider leaving higher education. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) found that new professionals predominately cite four challenges: establishing their identity as a professional, adjusting to the professional culture of the campus where they work, continuing their education around student affairs, and seeking advice from mentors. Further, a study of new student affairs professionals found that the quality of one's supervisory relationship is correlated with intentions to leave the field (Tull, 2006).

In a study exploring the organizational commitment of student affairs professionals at a variety of levels, it was found that job satisfaction as well as organizational support and politics influenced the student affairs professionals’ commitment to their roles at their present institutions (Boehman, 2007). Additionally, although limited to mid-level student affairs administrators, research has indicated that job satisfaction and intentions to leave a position are in part dependent on the quality of an individual’s work experience, including such factors as recognition of expertise, professional relationships, and opportunities for career development (Rosser & Javinar, 2003).

Although none of these studies examined whether intentions for leaving student affairs differed between functional areas, the findings are useful in framing the present exploration of how expectations of student affairs professionals dedicated to community
engagement work through coordinating local community service contribute to their intent to persist in their current positions. Rosser and Javinar’s (2003) finding that job satisfaction may depend in part on the recognition of expertise and competency in one’s role was based on mid-level student affairs professionals’ experiences. It is possible however, that a related factor contributes to the job satisfaction of entry-level professionals in specialized roles. To provide insight as to why student affairs professionals may choose to specialize in fostering community engagement through community service, as well as how prior experiences in community service may have provided these individuals a sense of expertise in this area, I will review literature related to motivations for engaging in community service. Beginning with studies focused on decisions to engage in community service generally, I will then provide an overview of the potential reasons faculty members may choose to incorporate a service-learning pedagogy in their courses. Before concluding the chapter, I will present a brief existing narrative of one student affairs professional’s motivations for pursuing community engagement work and offer a limited initial analysis based on the literature reviewed above.

Decision to Engage in Community Service

Service within the higher education context occurs both in academic courses and external to the classroom. Specifically, it has been suggested that community engagement can be thought of to exist along a continuum, from volunteering to service-learning, varying with respect to student learning outcomes (Furco, 1996; Sigmon, 1994). Service-learning has been defined as “a form of experiential education in which students
engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). In contrast, both community service and volunteerism de-emphasize the learning students gain by participating, focusing instead on the service being provided (Butin, 2010).

The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) developed by Clary, Snyder, and Ridge (1992) is a battery of questions that has become the standard method by which to assess motivations to volunteer (Gage & Thapa, 2012). The constructs of the VFI were theoretically derived (Clary, Snyder & Ridge, 1992) and have been empirically tested on different populations (Gage & Thapa, 2012). Included in the VFI are motivations related to personal values, developing understanding, interpersonal aspects, the protective nature of service, and the ability of service to enhance one’s self-esteem. The authors note that individuals may have more than one reason for volunteering depending on their current life context (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992). When administered to college students, researchers found that career motivation was slightly higher than among populations to which the VFI had previously been administered. Further, researchers found that of the college students in their study, 80% had volunteered in the last year and 39% of the students volunteered on their own (Gage & Thapa, 2012). Understanding the potential types of motivations for engaging independently in service helps to focus a discussion of what value individuals within higher education, specifically faculty, place on engaging students in service.

Motivations to Adopt Service-Learning Pedagogy
There has been some research on faculty who incorporate service-learning into their classrooms. Abes, Jackson, and Jones (2002) found that of the faculty members they surveyed, reasons to incorporate service-learning included those related to students’ personal and academic development, the provision of service useful to the community, development of partnerships, as well as increasing students awareness of the systemic nature of social issues. A similar study found family and consumer science faculty members had the same reasons for using service-learning in their courses, adding an increased appreciation of diversity (Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007).

Another study exploring the reasons faculty adopt a service-learning pedagogy examined personality traits of those who adopted the practice shortly after learning of it as compared to those who waited. Among the findings of this study was an identification of needs that were satisfied through using service-learning as a pedagogy. Specifically, faculty in the study noted the ability of service-learning to enhance their teaching effectiveness, through such means as creating connections between content and learning objectives, sparking classroom discussion, and teaching about diversity (McKay & Rozee, 2004).

O’Meara (2008) explored through a qualitative study the reasons faculty use service-learning as a teaching pedagogy from those considered exemplars in the field. She found similar reasons as the studies already mentioned, but also noted that 50% of faculty in her study also had personal reasons and commitments to the social issues or people involved in their service-learning courses and 60% felt that engaging students in service was a part of either their personal or professional identity (O’Meara, 2008).
In a later study by O’Meara and Niehaus (2009) examining the same service-learning faculty members considered to be exemplars, four dominant discourses were present in how faculty defined the purpose of service-learning. These four discourses presented service-learning as a means to enhance teaching and learning, express personal identity, exhibit the institutional mission, and as a practice that stemmed from a specific community partner or community need. Most faculty explained service-learning through the subthemes of identifying service-learning as a form of experiential learning (90%) and as a means to convey content area knowledge (89%) within the discourse of teaching and learning (O’Meara & Niehaus, 2009). Understanding how faculty view the purpose of service-learning serves to further identify those aspects of the practice which entice faculty members to implement service-learning in their classrooms.

As the above studies demonstrate, faculty members are largely drawn to service-learning as a pedagogy for its ability to enhance the classroom environment. Specifically, the desire to increase students’ appreciation of diversity and more effectively convey content material suggests that faculty recognize the ability of community service to prepare students for careers as well as a belief in the ability of service to develop students understanding of different issues, both aspects of the VFI. Studies exploring faculty motivations are however, limited in that those surveyed or interviewed did not have service and community engagement as their area of professional expertise or academic area of focus. As some have noted, for faculty, community engagement is considered an “add-on” (Bloomgarden & O’Meara, 2007, p. 15) to the full load that faculty members already have. As such, although an understanding of their
motivations may inform the present study, the differences between these two positions limits the ability to make a direct comparison to student affairs professionals.

Although there is not formal literature exploring the motivations of student affairs professionals to focus on community engagement work, there does exist limited evidence of this decision as an intentional choice. As mentioned previously, the literature discussed can be applied to the prior experiences and reasons one individual gave for pursuing a student affairs position within community engagement. Hui explained her decision to pursue this functional area in the following way:

Through my involvement with the leadership and service-learning office during my undergraduate career, I found opportunities to harness my anger and confusion by learning about and engaging in social justice and community activism. I came to realize that I had learned about myself, others, and the world through service-learning experiences and felt that they had shaped who I was and what I wanted to do with my life. I became passionate about working in service learning to process difficult questions with students so that they might have similar transformative learning experiences. (Hui, 2009, p. 23)

Although this quote is limited in scope, it provides valuable insight into those life experiences that can serve to motivate individuals to pursue this career. The quote suggests that the author engaged in the taking stock phase of Brown’s (2004) model, reflecting on those experiences in her undergraduate years that were most influential for her. After reflecting and narrowing her decision, it is clear that the higher education context became critical as she pursued her career path, supporting the findings of Taub
and McEwen (2006) as well as Watt and Richardson’s (2007; 2008) findings related to teachers. The above quote further suggests that just as some faculty members engage students in service through their coursework in an effort to better convey their content material (e.g. Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002; Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007), this author also seems to have desired to engage students in learning a specific knowledge content area.

Of specific interest is the suggestion made through this quote that the ability to engage students in their local community and grapple with challenging questions was the impetus for considering student affairs as a profession. This provides support for Tamir’s (2009) suggestion to not view educators as a group with a homogenous set of motivations and challenges the quantitative findings of Taub and McEwen (2006).

Outcomes Related to Community Service and Service-Learning

As mentioned, some faculty members choose to engage students in community service and service-learning in an effort to advance certain learning outcomes (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002; Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007). As the participants generally developed a desire to pursue a profession focused on community engagement as a result of their own experience, reviewing the outcomes associated with such involvement is appropriate. Research has been done indicating some of the student learning outcomes of engaging in community service. In their seminal work, Eyler and Giles (1999) identified a number of outcomes, such as interpersonal outcomes (i.e., diversity, collaboration, and self-growth), cognitive development (i.e., critical thinking), and citizenship (i.e., social responsibility and strategic knowledge). Further, Eyler, Giles, and Braxton (1997) found
that service-learning contributes to citizenship confidence, a likelihood of viewing social issues as systemic, and political participation skills but not critical thinking. Research further suggests that students are able to develop a richer understanding of diversity and personal awareness (Jones & Hill, 2001) and that participating in service-learning contributes to students’ understanding of the identity and self-authorship (Jones & Abes, 2004).

More recent research indicates that service-learning is also associated with developing leadership outcomes such as collaboration, citizenship, and controversy with civility, based in the social change model of leadership development (Dugan & Komives, 2010). Other research indicates that students learn about the communities they interact with (Moely, Furco & Reed, 2008), diversity (Keen & Hall, 2009), and self-report an increased sense of efficacy to effect change and compassion but do not show evidence of increases in moral development (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008). Further, service-learning has been identified as a “high-impact educational practice” resulting in deep learning as well as personal and practical gains for students (Kuh, Schneider, & Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008).

Summary

The studies reviewed above stem from disparate literature bases, yet offer insight to the specific aspects of the purpose of this study. The variety of studies focused on career choice and issues influencing specific populations as well as social cognitive career theory provide structure and a framework from which to approach this exploration. Viewing student affairs professionals as educators, connections can be made with
literature related to both faculty members who choose to implement service-learning in their courses for its ability to more effectively convey course content. Further, viewing student affairs professionals as educators allows links to be drawn between individuals’ motivations to become a K-12 educator out of an interest in the work or a desire to affect change. Combined, these studies serve to highlight the dearth research on this topic as well as provide a framework for thematically analyzing narratively based interviews of student affairs professionals focused on community engagement work. In the following chapter, I will outline the methodology for the used in this study.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I will outline the research design and focus of the study. The methodological approach, including epistemology and sampling frame, will be discussed. I will then outline the steps taken during data collection and analysis, followed by my efforts to triangulate the data and ensure trustworthiness. Finally, I will conclude with an exploration of researcher reflexivity and the limitations of the study.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this constructivist narrative inquiry was to explore the prior life experiences of student affairs professionals that have influenced their desire to apply for and persist in community engagement positions in higher education institutions. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are the prior life experiences of new student affairs professionals that have influenced their decision to hold a position focused on engaging students with the local community through co-curricular volunteerism, community service, or service-learning?

2. What factors influence individuals’ desire to leave or persist in these positions?

Methodological Approach

I employed a constructivist narrative methodology to explore the prior life experiences and critical events that have influenced new student affairs professionals to
pursue community engagement positions in higher education. Critical events are those experiences in an individual’s life that affect a change in worldview or understanding (Webster & Meratova, 2007). Additionally, I investigated the ways these prior life experiences shaped individuals’ expectations related to their current position. In exploring current experiences and prior expectations, I attempt to advance an understanding of the decision to engage and persist in community engagement work. In focusing on prior experiences, I sought to explore the collection and connections between a set of influential experiences rather than simply focusing on discrete events in the participants’ lives separate from the rest of the individuals lived experience. Further, in the re-telling I will center on the content of participants’ stories, including the other individuals who are involved and the sequence of events (Chase, 2005). The similarities in all participants’ stories will be highlighted using the content-categorical method of analysis (Leiblich, Tuval-Machiach, & Zilber, 1998).

Constructivism in qualitative research recognizes that knowledge and truth are determined through individual interpretation of experience (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). A constructivist epistemology is appropriate in narrative research given that such an epistemology situates knowledge as being “found within the individual” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 18). Knowledge of events in a participant’s past can only be constructed through their retelling. Other actors may reference the same events, but only the participants have the ability to convey the meaning and importance behind these experiences. As such, using a constructivist epistemology in narrative research highlights the belief that
participants have the ability to “construct events through narrative rather than simply refer to events” (Chase, 2005, p. 656; emphasis in original).

Operating from a constructivist epistemology, I recognize the nature of reality as “socially constructed, complex, and ever changing” (Glesne, 2006, p. 6). The nature of reality and truth has been constructed for each individual through their unique life experiences and as such is different for each person. Narrative researchers embrace this understanding and belief to acknowledge that individuals are continually in a process of “personal change” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 30) and as a result, narrative researchers must take this into account in their retelling. Further, as an extension of narrative researchers’ belief in a constructivist epistemology, their work is largely concerned with raising awareness of the particular experiences of participants given the context unique to each individual (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Narrative research can be conducted in different ways with regard to an individual’s life events by either focusing on a particular type of event or set of relationships, a specific aspect of one’s life, or an individual’s entire life story. Further, one can approach narrative methodology with an interest in what individuals are sharing, the language they use to frame their experiences, and the ways in which individuals construct aspects of their identity given certain organizational contexts (Chase, 2005).

More generally, narrative research “is a way of understanding experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). In the present study, the focus is on exploring the types of experiences and those individuals present in the participant’s lives that have shaped and influenced their decisions to pursue their current professional position. This was
accomplished through exploring, with participants, those experiences that were influential in affecting the individuals understanding of themselves or their view of the world (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Narrative research is often situated to focus on collecting stories of individuals’ lived experiences, and often the intent is to collect data to explore a given topic in depth, rather than breadth (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). As such, narrative researchers often develop close relationships with those whom they are interviewing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through the research process, both the researchers and their participants will continuously negotiate these relationships (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and have experiences that will engage both parties in a process of personal change (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Within narrative research, researchers are simultaneously unable to distance themselves from the lives and stories of their participants (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) and are, by the nature of narrative inquiry, distanced from seeing or knowing an experience as it happened, only as it is later reconstructed by participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative methodology is an appropriate approach for use in the present study given its focus on the unique lived experiences of individuals and the “retrospective meaning making” (Chase, 2005, p. 656) necessary in analysis. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained this aspect of narrative research as “a ‘re-search,’ a searching again” (p. 124). Making meaning of past experiences allows the narrator to detail the importance of a series of prior events, the consequences of individuals’ actions, and outline the importance for their audience. The present study is concerned with bringing the voices
and experiences of new student affairs professionals employed in positions focused on community engagement through co-curricular volunteerism, community service, and service-learning to the forefront while exploring past experiences which have drawn individuals to their current positions and influenced their professional expectations.

In approaching this study from a constructivist standpoint, the importance of relativism in interpretation is highlighted. The role of the researcher is to retell the stories of others. Through this process there is a distance between the researcher and the stories of interest that require interpretation. Interpretation in qualitative research more generally requires researchers to recognize the multiple interpretations that can be drawn from a given story or life experience, depending on one's own life context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This necessitates that narrative inquiry always holds the potential to be semi-autobiographical; in sharing the stories of others, narrative researchers share aspects of their own lives and ways of knowing with their audiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The present study explored a specific aspect of participants’ life journey related to their career path and current professional position. The area of central concern is the collection of critical incidents that have shaped individuals’ life experiences and which have directed individuals to pursue a specific functional area within student affairs, that of co-curricular community engagement through community service, volunteerism, and/or service-learning. The study focused on the prior experiences of these individuals, the other individuals involved, and when these experiences took place within the larger
scope of their evolving lives. The study also explored how participants expectations, as shaped by their past experiences, have been met or challenged in their current position.

**Sampling**

As narrative inquiry is focused on the lived experiences of individuals, the units of analysis are the stories and life events or histories of participants involved in the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Patton, 2002; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In using pre-determined criteria to identify the appropriate participants for this study, I engaged in purposeful sampling.

Purposeful sampling is often used when researchers desire to study a given topic in-depth. By selecting participants in this way, researchers choose those individuals who will be able to provide the most information relating to the research questions (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling includes a variety of types, from selecting those who are able to elucidate the average case of a given population (typical case), randomly selecting a smaller sample from those who meet a pre-determined set of criteria when the purposefully selected sample size may not have been feasible (random purposeful), to sampling those who are most accessible in an attempt to preserve resources, often while not as stringent on selection criteria (convenience) (Creswell, 2007).

For the present study, the following sampling criteria were developed to solicit those individuals who occupy community engagement positions that represent typical cases. In this context, a typical case was defined using Patton’s (2002) explanation as a guideline. He noted that a typical case is one that is able to convey “average like” (p. 236) characteristics of the phenomenon of interest. The purpose of selecting typical cases
is to illustrate and describe a setting or phenomena to those who are unfamiliar with it. For the current study, the sampling criteria delineate and identify the type of position from which to sample in an effort to select those positions deemed typical. A typical case was conceptualized to be a position that is focused on community engagement specifically and social issues generally. This was done to eliminate aspects of the position that may have drawn individuals to apply that are not the focus of the present inquiry. Coupled with the use of a narrative methodology, the focus on typical cases will serve to further highlight the particular aspects of individuals’ experiences that have drawn them to apply for this specific type of position in student affairs.

Participants for this study were solicited in the winter of 2012 through the use of two e-mail lists with a national scope. Through the college student personnel list-serv, faculty in higher education and student affairs graduate programs were asked to forward the recruitment e-mail to any recent alumni of their program whom they believe fit the criteria to participate in the study. Participants were also solicited through the higher education – service-learning list-serv managed through the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. The criteria to be used for participant selection follow.

All participants:

1. have received a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs or college student personnel within the past 3 years;

2. currently hold a a) full-time, b) institutionalized position c) at an urban; d) four-year, research institution; e) where 100% of their time; f) is spent coordinating or supporting local community engagement activities such as volunteerism,
community service, or service-learning which is not tied to an academic course; g) which has the potential to expose students to an array of social and environmental issues, and;

3. have or be able to gain internet access and a form of internet based video conferencing, such as Skype.

A rationale for the sampling criteria is below.

**Sampling Frame Rationale**

Student affairs professionals in the present study were limited to those new to the field, signified by having received a master’s degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs or College Student Personnel within the past three years. Although many studies of new professionals include those individuals who have been in the field five years or less (e.g. Tull, 2006), a study of job satisfaction and intention of student affairs professionals to pursue a new position found that the mean number of years new professionals had held their current position was 2.62 (Tull, 2006, p. 469). As I am concerned with new professionals’ experiences in their positions as well as their job search, limiting the sample to those who have three years or less of student affairs experience since receiving their master’s degree in the field is appropriate.

The decision to limit the institutional context to those in an urban setting stems from an understanding that the majority of what we accept as normative in the realm of community engagement in higher education occurs in an urban context. Community engagement in a rural context faces markedly different challenges and opportunities
(Casey et al., 2010). Such a distinction necessitates limiting the present study to the urban context in an effort to adhere to the concept of a typical case outlined above.

Hirt (2006) noted that staff members at research universities tend to engage deeply and narrowly within a functional area instead of cutting across multiple functional areas as in other institutional types. As a result, limiting the study to only those individuals employed at research institutions was made in an effort to complement the decision to explore those individuals holding positions that are focused solely on community engagement.

Determining what constitutes the local community is partially dependent on the environmental context of a given institution. There are, however, general guidelines that may apply to all institutions. Following the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) definition as outlined by the Office of Management and Budget (2009), MSAs consist of at least one urban area with a population of 50,000 or more and includes the surrounding areas that are connected by “a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured by commuting ties” (p. 8). Given these criteria, the local community has been defined as the MSA in which the institution is located.

Finally, as the focus of this study was to determine the factors that influence individuals to apply for community engagement positions, it is important to further qualify what types of positions within the umbrella of community engagement were considered appropriate. For example, some institutions may support positions that use community service or volunteerism to engage students in the local community around a single social issue. Although these positions are similar in nature to those that engage
students more generally across a variety of social and environmental issues, the focused nature of these positions may introduce a new influential factor into the decision-making process of student affairs professionals who apply for these positions. For instance, individuals may have applied for these positions because of the social issue and not because of the nature of the work. As a result, I developed the aspect of the sampling criteria that limits participants to those whose positions are structured to engage students in a variety of social or environmental issues.

Individuals interested in participating in the study were asked to respond to the recruitment e-mail, after which I determined whether or not an interested potential participant met the eligibility criteria. In total, 11 individuals responded to the recruitment e-mail. The four participants selected to participate in this study were those who most closely met the sampling frame. For example, a number of respondents were employed through different functional areas and another was not in an urban location and therefore ineligible to participate. Given the small number of responses, only one respondent met all of the sampling criteria, and as a result some concessions were made to the sampling frame. For example, two participants have a limited amount of involvement in alternative break programming, and another participant’s position includes leadership programming separate from community engagement. Additionally, one participant is employed at a master’s level institution. Given that the roles and responsibilities of these respondents met the sampling frame, in addition to the urban settings of their institutions, I included each of them in the present study. After determining an interested individual was eligible to participate in the study, they were
asked their availability to schedule the initial interview. Follow-up interviews were scheduled at the conclusion of each interview.

Since individual narratives are the units of interest, some narrative researchers hold that “the range of narrative possibilities within any group of people is potentially limitless” (Chase, 2005, p. 667). As such, narrative researchers may often interview fewer individuals than other qualitative researchers, as the focus is on the depth and details of a particular experience or set of experiences rather than uncovering similarities across narratives (Chase, 2005). In establishing sample boundaries and criteria for the study, I considered the depth of responses the interview questions are designed to elicit, probable length of interviews, and how this time commitment may impact participants. The number of individuals who meet the selection criteria for the study is limited, suggesting the concept of establishing a minimum number of participants (Jones et al., 2006; Patton, 2002) was appropriate. Given these factors, the study explored four individual’s narratives as they relate to their career paths in student affairs and community engagement.

Data Collection

Most research that uses a narrative methodology involves conversation between the researcher and their participant(s) (Hollingsworth & Dybdal, 2007). Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) draw attention to the importance of document analysis in narrative inquiry. As such, the present study included both semi-structured interviews with participants as well as the collection and initial analysis of selected documents.

Interviews
In qualitative research, interviews with participants may be structured in a variety of ways. Conversations may range from natural and unstructured to more structured questions and processing (Patton, 2002), depending on the goals and beliefs of the researcher (Jones et al., 2006). The use of a standardized set of questions allows for all participants to respond to the same questions, asked in the same manner and order. Often, by writing out structured questions before the interview, researchers are able to critically examine the language they will be using and determine how best to word their questions. The use of structured interviews however, limits the flexibility with which researchers are able to frame their questions and potentially puts boundaries around the types of information and amount of appropriate data researchers are able to elicit from participants (Patton, 2002).

Less structured interviews, such as those that simply follow a guide of topics to be covered allow for more flexibility when engaging with participants. This flexibility is limited however, in that conversations with participants are still generally kept to those topics the researcher outlined prior to the interviews. The use of natural conversation allows for the most flexibility and provides participants the ability to steer the conversation and relate stories that may further elucidate their points. This natural approach to interviewing has the potential cost of the researcher forgetting to discuss the same topics with all participants (Patton, 2002).

Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) provided eight principles to consider when interviewing using a narrative methodology. These principles include reminding researchers to listen without judgment, allow for conversation to shift and change to
reflect emerging intentions and priorities of participants, reflect on and determine the learning that develops from each conversation, and encourage conversation around difficult topics, among others (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). Although these are important to remember in most qualitative studies, the tendency for narrative researchers to use a more conversational approach to their research necessitates regularly revisiting the importance of the structure and principles of the methodology that guide our work.

As I viewed my role in this process as one of researcher as narrator, I recognized that I view the question of central concern in the study as one that may require guidance and structure, and consequently developed a list of questions to ask each participant. However, as narrative research is concerned with the particular (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) and recognizes that the socially constructed reality of each individual is different (Glesne, 2006), these questions served only to guide the conversations I held with participants. In narrative inquiry, it is important to recognize that stories and experiences of individuals are “anchored in the cultural reality” (Glesne, 2006, p. 82) of participants and as such may necessitate that questions have the flexibility to be varied to reflect the different life contexts of participants. Further, as a result of the differences between individuals, the interview questions were be coupled with the appropriate use of probing questions to elicit deeper responses with more information related to the central research questions (Patton, 2002). Examples of probing and follow-up questions are included in the interview protocol (Appendix A).

All participants completed three separate interviews. Interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes, with the majority lasting one hour. Each interview was structured to cover
a specific time period in the lives of the participants. The first interview focused predominately on the influential life experiences of participants through high school and as an undergraduate, the second on their full-time employment before they began graduate work as appropriate, as well as their experiences as a master’s student and their initial job search, and the final interview on their experiences in their current position and anticipated future professional experiences. For those participants who held professional positions before starting their master’s program, questions pertaining to their job search were pushed to the final interview in the interest of time. The full interview protocol (Appendix A) includes questions that reflect the different aspects of these stories and events that are important to cover in narrative inquiry.

Interview questions and the accompanying probing questions were developed to reflect the analysis process outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000; see below). The order of questions, both within each individual interview as well as the overarching guiding timeframes each interview spanned, was intentionally determined after reflecting on Patton’s (2002) suggested practices of ordering interview questions to establish rapport and trust with participants.

In narrative inquiry, researchers retelling the stories of others should take care to explore dimensions of chronology, context, and the internal and external social aspect of individuals lives in their analysis in a way that is reflective of the research questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The importance of these three dimensions to the narrative inquiry process is reflected in the list of interview questions and potential probes.
Glesne (2006) argued that qualitative researchers should both pre-pilot and pilot their interview questions, often with individuals who have a background or experience in the research topic. For the present study, I selected a peer with whom I pre-piloted the questions, to ensure that the wording of the questions is appropriate and reflects the research questions of interest. Additionally, the questions were piloted with an individual who holds a position related to community engagement. The process of piloting the questions allowed me to identify biases and assumptions that were made in my original interview protocol and resulted in significant changes to the interview questions. This helped to ensure that my interview questions elicited the types of responses I intended, that they were worded appropriately, and allowed for individuals to share the appropriate experiences.

Interviews with all participants were conducted via Skype, an internet-based video-conferencing service. The use of this technology enabled me to interview participants residing in any geographic area, provided participants had internet access. Further, the use of this technology allowed distance interviews without losing many potential aspects of non-verbal communication that are inherent in interviews conducted via telephone (Creswell, 2007). One interview had significant connectivity issues and therefore may have hindered the richness of data collected in this interview, and one other interview had minimal connectivity issues that limited the quality of the participant’s audio on the recording. In these cases, extra efforts were made to ensure that the statements recorded and transcribed reflected the statements made by participants during these interviews.
I conducted the majority of my interviews from my apartment to ensure good internet connectivity, although some interviews were conducted in my office through the use of an Ethernet cord. The majority of participants completed their interviews in their office, which may have influenced the type or amount of information that they were willing to share related to challenges and experiences in their current position. Two participants conducted at least two interviews from their home, but the type and depth of information shared does not seem to vary from those who completed interviews in their office.

Documents

Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that the use of documents in narrative research may help to contextualize the lives and experiences of participants. Such documents may help to provide detail and information important to the research question that occurred before the research project began (Patton, 2002). In this study, those documents served to best contextualize the process by which participants came to pursue community engagement positions were collected. Documents collected through this study included resumes and cover letters sent to potential employers during participants’ last job search as well as current position descriptions (as available). Resumes and cover letters were collected from all four participants, and position descriptions were collected from three individuals. Institutional websites also served to provide insight into the institutional context and environment, both of the higher education institution as a whole as well as those specific to the community engagement programs with which the participants work.
Further, in the instance where a participant mentioned an influential program at their undergraduate institution, this website was reviewed and differences between the current portrayal of the program and participants experiences were discussed in an effort to develop a more robust understanding of the influential aspects of their undergraduate education.

The depth of interviews with participants coupled with documents, which were used to provide insight into the past experiences of participants at a specific point in time, allowed me to generate a thick description of the lives and experiences of participants. Geertz’s concept of generating a thick description, as outlined by Glesne (2006), moves the analysis and retelling of participants’ experiences beyond simply restating the descriptions provided by participants to understanding the “core” (p. 28) of the phenomenon of interest.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis directs researchers to organize and analyze their field texts, asking these texts “questions of meaning and social significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 130). For the current study, I used the categorical-content method of narrative analysis outlined by Leiblich et al. (1998) to interpret participants’ responses and storied life experiences. In their outline of the categorical-content method of analysis, Leiblich et al. (1998) instructed researchers to follow a number of basic steps which may be modified as appropriate to better suit the research questions. These steps include identification and “selection of the subtext” (p. 112), identification of “content categories” (p. 113), “sorting material into the categories” (p. 113), and finally “drawing
conclusions from the results” (p. 114). Each of these steps as they related to the present study is outlined further below.

Leiblich et al. (1998) stated that the subtext could be thought of as the “content universe” (p. 112) of the inquiry. In this study, the subtext was identified and focused by the research questions. That is, instead of collecting life histories of the participants and then identifying the subtext of their path to their current professional position, the interview questions were crafted to reflect this focused aspect of their life history.

For each participant, I developed three storied constructions of the collection of their past experiences as conveyed through our conversations and available texts. This document was conceptualized to take the form of what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) term an “interim text” (p. 133). It assisted in the effort to begin to organize and explore the chronology, actors, and events of each participant’s life experiences. The interim texts were shared with participants as consisted of providing an avenue for ensuring accuracy of analysis.

After this interim text was generated for each participant, the major themes and events were identified and reflected on in my researcher journal. To accomplish this, I read and re-read interview transcripts to identify similar themes, events, challenges, and turning points in the lives of the participants. Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote that when engaging in the coding of field texts in narrative inquiry, researchers should pay attention not only to what was said, but also to the silences and absences that emerge from the data. Through this process, I was able to identify content categories as they are suggested in the stories of the participants. Following this process
of identification, transcripts were re-read to sort the stories and experiences of participants into each of the categories.

After interviews were coded and organized in this manner, the uniqueness of the individual journeys of the participants became increasingly apparent and I struggled with limiting the richness of participants’ individual journeys through highlighting the shared experiences by creating “content categories” (Leiblich, et al., 1998, p. 113). As such, I constructed Chapter Four with a focus on providing a thick description (Glesne, 2006) of the individual narratives in which analysis is embedded. Following the narratives, the content categories developed during analysis are presented. Within the narratives and presentation of the themes, I offer my interpretation of the life experiences of the participants as well as their experiences in their current positions. Such interpretations, although important to the field of higher education, are limited by my own biases, lenses, and previous experiences. As such, steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and my interpretations.

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

Research conducted by a single researcher using only one method may be prone to errors and the researcher’s ability to draw valid conclusions through the process of analysis can be limited. In an effort to limit these mistakes, researchers often engage in multiple methods of data triangulation through a variety of data collection and analysis methods (Patton, 2002). Through engaging in a variety of triangulation methods, researchers are better able to ensure congruence, and by extension trustworthiness, of the
research process from the generation of research questions to writing and dissemination (Jones et al., 2006).

A variety of methods of triangulation exist, including collecting data from multiple sources, ensuring that more than one researcher has access to the data to provide feedback on analyses, as well as making use of participants own thoughts and beliefs of the researchers analysis process (Patton, 2002). In the present study, a variety of triangulation methods were used, such as the collection of data from multiple sources, member-checking, and the use of a peer-reviewer.

Specifically, data was collected both through interviews and available documents. A result of engaging in a qualitative research process with a national scope limits my ability to make use of other qualitative data collection methods such as observations. Member-checking the initial analyses drawn from the transcripts through the use of interim texts gave participants the opportunity to provide feedback on their perception of the accuracy and of the analyses drawn regarding their individual stories (Patton, 2002). Further, the use of a peer-reviewer assisted in limiting the influence of my own biases in the analysis process. Participants had the option to provide feedback through the member-check via e-mail, telephone, or video conferencing, as they preferred.

A peer-reviewer was selected who is familiar with higher education, qualitative research, and who has some knowledge of the purposes and activities associated with co-curricular volunteerism, community service, and service-learning. Additionally, I have kept a researcher journal chronicling my decisions, reactions, and reflections on the research process.
Researcher Reflexivity

As mentioned previously, narrative research is highly autobiographical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and the present study is intentionally structured and organized in a way that allowed me to develop relationships with my participants, which further allowed for both the participant and myself to learn from the research process. Such relationships and the nature of narrative research highlight the importance of understanding my own relationship with the research topic (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2002), including my biases and the potential ways in which the participants may interpret my perceived background (Zurita, 2001), and how this may have influenced the answers they provided during the interview.

As a Higher Education and Student Affairs master’s student, I am in a position that the participants of this study have recently held themselves. Additionally, it has been an aspiration of mine to one day hold a student affairs community engagement position, and I have previously served in a grant-funded position where I engaged in similar work to that which many participants are currently coordinating. Further, the majority of student affairs professionals are White women (Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloan, 2006) and participants were approximately the same age as myself as a result of this study focusing on new professionals. As such, it is likely that the participants were able to find some aspect of my identity that they share. These factors can serve to facilitate rapport and trust with participants, but they also held the potential for participants to incorrectly assume how I may analyze or interpret a certain statement or experience that they may share. These issues highlight the importance of keeping a
researcher journal that documents my reactions, perceptions, and reflections on my relationships with the participants over the course of the research process.

For example, much of the service-learning literature discusses benefits of engaging students in the local community, so much so that there has developed what some term a “victory narrative” (Gilbride-Brown, 2008) of the practice often perpetuated by those involved in the work, such as those who served as participants in this study. Critics of the practice have conveyed the service-learning as “a voyeuristic exploitation of the cultural other that masquerades as academically sanctioned servant leadership” (Butin, 2003, p. 1675). I often find myself torn between these two beliefs, seeing value and truth in each, while recognizing that occasionally those who engage in this work are not receptive to the criticism or are unaware of what some believe are the damaging costs of community engagement on those agencies and communities they state are served through their work.

I have seen my beliefs in the weaknesses of community engagement work exhibited in early drafts of interview questions and have begun to engage in an internal dialogue around the purpose of each interview question and accompanying set of potential probes. I entered the interview process concerned about how these beliefs and values would potentially exhibit themselves in my interviews, analysis, and writing, how participants may interpret the way in which I present my conclusions, and how this may affect my relationship with participants. As the interviews with the participants of this study progressed, I found it increasingly important to reflect on what I believed to be the “purpose” of community engagement work, what I have internalized to be “good” or
“bad” practices within community engagement, and my own professional philosophy and orientation to community engagement work. The stories shared by the participants forced me to more deeply reflect on my own prior experiences than I had before I began our conversations. Through the use of journaling, a peer reviewer, and further opportunities to reflect on these beliefs I brought some of these issues into a higher level of consciousness and visibility in my research, in the process striving to reduce the assumptions I developed around participants’ prior experiences and professional philosophy regarding community engagement.

Summary

The present study made use of a constructivist narrative methodology to explore the life experiences that have directed student affairs professionals to pursue positions focused on engaging students with the local community through service. Through multiple interviews and document analysis, I engaged participants in the retelling of their paths to their current positions. Through this process, I have developed and offer an interpretation of those life experiences that participants note were important in instilling a desire to connect undergraduate students with the local community and their willingness to continue to promote the community engagement through service in higher education.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to share the journeys of four new student affairs professionals currently holding positions in which they work to engage undergraduate students with the local community through service and volunteerism. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the prior life experiences of new student affairs professionals that have influenced their decision to hold a position focused on engaging students with the local community through co-curricular volunteerism, community service, or service-learning?

2. What factors influence individuals’ desire to leave or persist in these positions?

I first present the individual stories of these four professionals which highlight the aspects of their lives that have been influential in guiding them towards their current positions, their experiences in their positions, where they would like to move professionally in the future. Following this, I highlight the individual themes found amongst the narratives. Finally, I provide a deeper analysis of the journeys shared by the participants through connecting the individual themes found in the narratives.

The purpose of the four narratives presented is to retell the life stories and critical events the participants shared with me as being influential on their journey to both student affairs as a profession and the functional area of community engagement and
local community service, service-learning, and volunteerism. As with most narrative research, the researcher tends to take on the role of narrator charged with re-telling the stories of their participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, the analysis of the narratives is undoubtedly influenced by my own prior experiences with service and community engagement grounded in antifoundational service-learning (Butin, 2010). I also have a commitment to exploring issues of social justice and a desire to engage students in service as an avenue to educate for positive social change while ethically developing and sustaining reciprocal community partnerships grounded in strong personal relationships.

Although the journeys taken by each participant are reflective of their own experiences and identities, common themes and similarities emerged between their stories. These included the role of mentorship, undergraduate involvement, and the intentionality with which they approached their professional development after deciding to enter student affairs as a career. Each narrative concludes with a brief summary of the participant’s journey, which will be further explored and developed in the following chapter.

Narratives of Prior Experiences: Passion to Profession

The individual narratives are the focus of this section, in which analysis is embedded. As narrative research is focused primarily on the individual, I have explored the paths of each professional, focusing on the critical events, moments, and others that appear to have influenced their decision to pursue community engagement positions. Consistent with narrative inquiry, the journeys are arranged chronologically, subdivided
into sections including Youth, Undergraduate Years, Post-Baccalaureate Years (as appropriate), Graduate School, Job Search, Current Position, and Future Goals, and presented in alphabetical order by participants’ pseudonym.

Bethany: Social Justice Educator through Service-Learning

Bethany identifies as a “well-off” female in her late 20’s and both as “White and Jewish,” specifying that “my dad’s Jewish so it’s the wrong half but, I still identify ethnically as Jewish.” She attended the large, flagship public institution in her home state where she was extensively involved in both curricular and co-curricular community engagement programs based in social justice. Through her prior experiences during her undergraduate years and her full-time employment before enrolling in a master’s program, Bethany has developed a passion for continuing to educate students about social justice issues. For the time being she has committed herself to striving to achieve this through service-learning.

Youth: “As long as it makes the world a better place.” Bethany was raised in a fairly religious home; her mother served as the campus minister at a nearby institution, although her father is Jewish. She shared:

I think that in Jewish culture there’s a lot about giving back and serving your community and I think because I grew up in a, in a community that was not Jewish, like I was the token Jew, most of the time. I never really fully appreciated that.

As a result, Bethany was raised with an emphasis on service to the community. Her parents always told her “You can do anything you want to do as long as it makes the
world a better place.’ So that was kind of my framework for figuring out what I wanted to do.’ This early teaching has carried throughout Bethany’s life in virtually all the things with which she has been involved. Her parents’ emphasis on making the world a better place may have influenced Bethany’s later focus on understanding systems as a result of the interconnecting nature of social issues and identity.

Growing up, she “thought I wanted to be a math and science teacher” because:

I think you know like the one constant trend is that in every stage of my life, I see the group of people that I’m with being at a really cool age… I don’t know, I think it was probably something that I knew? I knew was it was cause I had seen it all my life.

Bethany has difficulties related to reading, writing, and memory formation, which affected her schoolwork when she was younger. By high school “I, you know, was just finally catching up to where I needed to be in learning the skills to deal with my learning disability.”

When it came time to choose a college to enroll in, Bethany narrowed down her options between the highly ranked state flagship university where her brother and sister had both enrolled in their Honors College and a less highly ranked institution that offered Bethany admission into their honors program. She shared that “Uhm, to be honest my dad kinda made that decision. He was like ‘Your brother and sister went to [the State University], you’re gonna go to [the State University]! You’re just as great as they are.’”

Throughout her extended family, education is regarded highly; Bethany shared a story of one of her younger cousins asking at the age of five about where another cousin was
attending graduate school, stating “that’s just like, how entrenched it is” in her family. Bethany later used these family characteristics to frame her decision to pursue graduate work.

Influential to Bethany’s later involvement, her mother coordinated service programs on a nearby college campus through her work with the ministry and her sister shared meaningful stories of her experience with Alternative Break trips as an undergraduate student, which may have prompted Bethany’s desire to become involved in these programs later on.

Undergraduate years: “I was involved in all of their programs.” Despite her desire to become a math and science teacher, “by the time I went in to college I took like, the bio, intro to bio class and then intro to calc class. And was just like, nope. Not gonna happen.” She then decided to pursue a major in General Studies with significant coursework in “American Studies, African American Studies, Women’s Studies…”

One of the more influential aspects of Bethany’s undergraduate years was her participation in a living-learning community focused on community service and diversity awareness. She recalled that “I think my mom and I went to a fair and she picked up a flyer on this learning community and she’s like, great, we’re gonna, check that box on your application.”

Through this community Bethany participated in and led Alternative Break trips, in part because of the prior experiences of her mother and sister coordinating or participating in similar programs. When Bethany:
Heard one of the older students on my hall talking about being, leading the alternative break trip for our community, I was like, oh yeah, I could totally do that, and you’re leading the trip and you’re cool, so I wanna do that. Also through this learning community, Bethany was connected to another curricular-based program focused on exploring issues related to education and youth by using service-learning as a pedagogy. Bethany shared that:

I’m a White girl going in to a school that was 100% Black. Uhm, and so to be able to be in a course while we were doing this volunteer experience and to be able to talk about you know, what’s [the city’s] history, what-you know, why is it the way it is now… was very powerful for her. To this end, “I mean it was totally that living-learning community that then shaped what I wanted to do.” These initial experiences led Bethany to further pursue service related opportunities as she continued her involvement and coursework at her undergraduate institution. The issues that Bethany noted were focuses of the programs she participated in appeared to have influenced her current approach to her work, similar to many of the other participants. Bethany is highly interested in exploring issues of identity and power through service and is focused on issues of social justice and the influence of community engagement programs on the communities and individuals they serve.

Bethany continued to take courses that made use of a service-learning pedagogy and also expanded her participation in Alternative Break trips to those that were open to all students at the university. Expanding her involvement in Alternative Breaks in this
way served as the impetus for her intensive involvement with the university’s center devoted to service-learning. Through this center, Bethany “was involved in all of their programs, for the most part.” Most of these were extended commitment programs that allowed her to develop meaningful relationships with those she was serving. For example, Bethany spent a year tutoring a middle school student and stated, “I’d seen… her progress throughout the whole year and I had come to know what she was dealing with.” Experiences such as these contrasted sharply with some other “what I would say are not so great service-learning experiences” which included a program where students:

Would go into [the city] once a year or once a semester and they would like, bus, hundreds of kids in and we would pick up trash. And like, it was very much like, the very privileged, educated, well-off kids going in to [the city] for the day and look what good work we are doing.

Bethany also discussed a community based research course she took where “we never ended up doing any research or, we just sat there when we went.” Bethany was the only participant who critiqued some of the programs organized by her undergraduate institution, specifically in terms of their impact on the community. Her critiques suggest a belief that there is more to coordinating community engagement programs than providing well-structured learning environments for students.

In addition to these varied experiences with service, Bethany also completed “two summer AmeriCorps terms,” noting that “I was really lucky that I didn’t have to work, uhm, during, while I was taking classes.” In both positions, she worked with non-profits helping to develop their volunteer programs. Bethany shared that these experiences were
“for sure the first time that I really got to experience helping other people do service and being that facilitator. Uhm, and that’s, to me, was a really powerful experience.”

As Bethany approached graduation, she “applied for one job and one graduate program. Uhm, my senior year of college. And thank God I didn’t get into the Social Work program.” Stating later that, “why I say thank goodness I didn’t get in to Social Work program is I think I’d be so, burned out by now.” Which was an important consideration for Bethany given “another mother quote… is that ‘burnout is not an option.’” After graduation, Bethany moved to another higher education institution where she worked for an external organization concerned with organizing students around political campaigns. For Bethany:

It was almost in the interview that I, that I was talking through the answer, that to me it just made so much sense that like, you know, you do community service, you learn about the social issues, and this like, identity piece that’s really important to me and then you like, go and take action. So, the idea of running political campaigns, it just like, made so much sense as I talked about it in my interview that I was like, clearly the next step in what I’m doing.

This reflection in what her next steps would be can also be seen later in how Bethany approaches her current work. Perhaps as a result of the influence her undergraduate involvement appears to have had on her, she later expressed a belief in educating students for social justice. This statement suggests that perhaps her focus on social justice assumes an intent that after graduation her students will pursue careers focused on taking action.
Post-baccalaureate years: “I didn’t even know it was called student affairs to be honest.” Bethany believes that her role coordinating political campaigns immediately after graduation “is probably why I have the view I have now… Ever since then I think I’ve really had the mentality of an organizer and my job isn’t to do something, it’s to organize others to do it.”

In this role, Bethany organized college students around environmental campaigns as well as a major voter registration drive. She put in “a lot of hard hours, a lot of forced socials with staff afterwards,” in a work environment that “was just like, this really big work hard, play hard mentality.” This lifestyle “had been like, just like really hard on my, on my body and my like, all parts of me.” The high stress of this position caused Bethany to apply for other positions after one year, eventually accepting an administrative position at the center for service-learning at her undergraduate institution. Before starting her new role, Bethany took a family vacation where she discussed potential career paths with her mother:

My mother I think put like, service-learning and graduate school in to Google.

And UMass Amherst had a track in service-learning and that came up… I didn’t even know it was called student affairs to be honest. Uhm, but I think that was the first time that I realized that it was a possibility… and not just that it was a possibility but that I was pretty certain that that was what I was going to do.

Although Bethany did not attend UMass Amherst for her graduate work, this was the first time that Bethany realized that student affairs was a potential career path. Although she was extensively involved as an undergraduate, the majority of the professional staff did
not hold did not hold degrees in student affairs, and as a result, she never heard about the profession. In her administrative position, Bethany was able to meet student affairs professionals in other administrative areas who were able to provide mentorship and guidance. In this position, she also realized that student affairs could be a sustainable lifestyle describing:

To one of my coworkers at the time, like, I no longer went to work with this like, heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach that I wasn’t going to make it through the day. Because I knew at 5 o’clock that my boss was going to tell me to go home. Which is something that didn’t happen to me as an organizer, and so I knew that it was a career and I could do it, and it was also sustainable.

While working here, Bethany felt like, she “saw all the wires behind, behind the magic show. Uhm, and so I think that’s helpful in helping me now think about like, man, I might screw up. And that might really suck. But it’s like, part of my journey and my learning.” She also shared that in seeing how the behind the scenes of the center worked “in retrospect it like, showed me that student affairs is a lot bigger than just my little house with all of my little service-learning folk, but I think again that helped me realize that like, that place isn’t perfect.”

*Graduate school: “I went there with a purpose.”* Bethany’s decision to attend her graduate institution was decided at least in part, by the assistantship she was offered. At one institution where she interviewed, she:

Stayed with a hall director and the elevator right outside his door would ding every five minutes. And I was like, ‘Hell. No. Not for me.’ So I mean, I think
that, I was offered some, a Res Life position at another school and then kinda was like, Nope. Don’t want to do that.

At another institution, Bethany “interviewed for their service-learning or civic engagement or whatever community service office you want to call it. And their [Graduate Assistant] was essentially running a volunteer database. And it was like… that’s not what I want to do.”

Another determining factor for Bethany in considering where to enroll for graduate work was the philosophy of the potential supervisors and the faculty:

When I was applying for positions for graduate school, it was the first time that I realized that service-learning didn’t mean service-learning in how I mean it to everybody. Uhm, and so I had a really hard time grasping, how can you do service-learning work without doing social justice work? Uhm, because for me the identity piece of it, and learning about how we are socialized and systems of power and privilege and oppression are all tied up in working with non-profit agencies. Uhm, if it wasn’t, we wouldn’t have to do work at nonprofits.

These statements suggest that as Bethany was searching for the graduate program with the best fit, she was considering both the academic components as well as the professional experiences she would have. She was determined to find a graduate assistantship that afforded her the opportunity to gain practical experience in organizing service-learning efforts that aligned with her personal philosophy at an institution that also afforded her the academic preparation that would prepare her intellectually to engage students in the community. As a result, Bethany enrolled in a program that she felt met
her expectations and needs of a social justice orientation through the coursework offered and offered her an assistantship with the possibility of infusing a social justice and identity development aspect. She eventually “ended up taking my courses out of sequence because uhm, I went there with a purpose to do service-learning and to do social justice work, and I was going to take those classes.” The courses Bethany took during her master’s program also afforded her the opportunity to reflect on her personal life as she first decided to come out during her years in graduate school.

Bethany also pursued the thesis option and conducted original research around service-learning programs. This option appealed to her because:

You know I didn’t want to graduate from this master’s program and then apply to a Ph.D. program not knowing if I liked research. And so, and so [writing a thesis] was my way of kind of putting my toe in and seeing if I liked it. And I loved it! I mean, I loved it. It was, it was hard, but I loved it.

During graduate school, Bethany served as the Graduate Assistant in her master’s institution’s office for service-learning on special projects. In her second year, she added additional responsibilities around working with faculty to engage them in using service-learning in their classroom:

But teaching faculty who’ve never done service-learning just to do the basics of service-learning, you don’t even get into like, having conversations around race or socioeconomic privilege or educational privilege, or sexual orientation privilege… You are basically teaching them ok, how do you meet, how do you
find a community partner. Or how do you help your students actually show up at their service site.

Job search: “I had to know what I was about.” When faced with completing her job search after her graduate work, Bethany stated that “I didn’t want to do student affairs to be like the, clearly the Res Life person, but even the advisor, I mean I could talk myself into any of that stuff, but this is what I am really passionate about.” She also stated “I mean I was looking for all service-learning jobs… And at a range of institutions on you know, their understanding or not understanding of service-learning.” Like some other participants, Bethany stated that those in the field shared with her that “you can either choose… where you go or what you do, but you can’t choose both. So I was choosing my functional area.” Bethany’s experience in her master’s program and interviewing for graduate programs:

Made me realize that I had to know what I was about, uhm, before, before, or while I was looking for a full-time jobs afterwards. And so, you know I was very clear at my interview. You know, for me, those, the three pieces of service-learning, you gotta have service, you gotta have education, and you gotta have reflection. And it’s not service-learning if it’s not that. And that, the reflection, a lot of the reflection for me is around identity development.

Later Bethany shared job descriptions that had “anything about like, service-learning versus just community service. Uhm, I mean, social justice was a big plus” were exciting to her. Although she applied for a number of positions, Bethany shared two specific interview experiences with me. At one, she:
Met with their LGBT Coordinator and I said you know, I was talking about like, what’s it like to be not straight living [here]. And I said ‘Oh, I identify as all gender loving,’ and she looked at me and was like, ‘Well, what does that mean?’ And one, that’s pretty straightforward right? Two, like, like why are you going to use that tone of voice? Like, this is clearly not a place that I want to be. So, you know, I got home and I withdrew my name from consideration because I knew that that wasn’t [where I wanted to be].

At the other institution, where she currently works, Bethany felt much more comfortable and was impressed by the students:

I just knew the students I met with here were talking about service-learning in the way that I was talking about service-learning. They weren’t shocked by the identity discussions that I wanted to have with them. Uhm, it was pretty, that was pretty normal.

In comparing these two experiences and the role of geography in her job search, Bethany shared that whether the institution was located in an urban or rural location “didn’t [matter] at the time that I applied,” however, referring to the comment made by the LGBT Coordinator, “I think in the end it definitely mattered. But at the time, I was like, ahh! Anything!” Bethany also shared that another “school had called me to schedule an interview but they never got back to me. Which is still true, they never got back to me.”

Similar to some of the other participants, Bethany was concerned with finding a position at an institution that had the potential to be in line with her own philosophy towards service-learning. The issue of congruence between the participants orientation
towards service and that of the institution and office they were considering to work for appears to be extremely influential during the job search, although participants do not seem to discuss this process of finding a fit as being highly intentional as they were engaging in the job search process.

*Current position:* “*We’re not going to get to this place where everything is perfect.*” Bethany started her position “in a really basic space because we were all, I mean, my whole area was new, nobody, nobody stayed. And so we didn’t know what we were doing.” Still, coming into her position, Bethany was excited for what awaited her. She stated, “I heard you know, good things about [this institution] being a really diverse campus” and “I had worked with uh, a program similar to one of the programs that I work with now. … And so, I kind of felt like I knew what I was getting in to.” Further, based on the students she met during her interview, she “was expecting that I would be working with some high quality students.” When discussing what excites Bethany about her current position, she shared that “I am the local community service-learning coordinator. You, I’m not defined by spring breaks. I’m not defined by a specific [social issue] you know?”

In her current role, “the students that I work with on a regular basis are amazing.” She shared that:

I just had a student in here the other day talking about… at our training on Monday we’re going to be talking about religion and, and like, we talk about the cycle of socialization and oppression and she’s really religious and so she came in and talked about how she’s really uncomfortable. And yet, I had to remind her
that she just, she had already come up with our entire agenda for Monday. So even if she’s not the one facilitating that, she’s already stretched herself immensely.

For Bethany, moments with students like these represent “a success, you know, she’s able to push [herself] and grow.” In general she articulated her approach to her work by sharing her belief that “we’re on a journey, there’s like, not an end point, we’re not going to get to this place where everything is perfect.” For Bethany, being able to accept the fact that “I still have days where I’m like, ‘shit, you just screwed everything up’” in pursuit of this learning process is intensely stress relieving. She elaborated by saying:

This might be like a year cycle for a student or a semester cycle for a student, but I’m here for the long run, and so like, I may not give someone the absolute best experience, but as long as I’m learning how to do that in the future, it’s still a positive in the long run. I think just realizing that has been really helpful and really stress relieving for me. Cause then there’s not so much pressure that every single student get that perfect experience since that’s never going to happen anyway.

Bethany still carries her experience of being an organizer with her in her professional career and has set strict boundaries for her students to keep her personal life separate from her professional life. As mentioned, the language that Bethany uses to frame her approach to her work suggests that she operates from a strictly social justice approach. She shared that she wants her students to recognize issues beyond the root causes of hunger and homelessness to recognize the “cycle of socialization” and how this
contributes to identity formation and systems of power. She routinely used language such as society, community, and systems, stressing the interconnectedness of these entities and the role of identity in shaping the human experience. This orientation is evident in how Bethany attempts to work with students and structure service experiences.

Future goals: “I never want to leave this capacity building piece.” As mentioned, Bethany is considering going back to school to get her Ph.D. and further the research agenda on service-learning, but right now she is still unsure of what the future holds. In the last few months though, Bethany has experienced a life change that has influenced how she thinks about her future goals:

Up until this point, my job and my career and what I do has been my purpose in life, and I think… now that I’m engaged to my partner, there’s like this whole other component. It’s not just me making decisions for me anymore. It’s me making decisions about this like, family unit. Uhm, and like, this potential family units that could add like, little family units. And you know, as we’re starting to do that, you know like, we’re looking more into like, what financially makes sense, what’s even financially viable.

With learning to rethink her future goals and what options are available to pursue, Bethany has been considering a number of different options, one being “to do consulting for colleges and universities around service-learning centers and best practices.” Although conceptualizing a specific future goal was difficult, she was easily able to talk about the aspects of her position that she wants to continue to have in her professional life:
I never want to leave is this capacity building piece. You know, I had that, the thought my senior year of college or right after, of you know, I could be a Social Worker and I could do X amount of good with my life. And that would be good, and that would be great. But if I could impact students, or impact others to do that work, then, then somehow I feel like I’m doing exponentially more good.

Despite whatever haziness is on the horizon for Bethany as she considers her future professional goals, she stated “I’m committed to being a social justice educator. I’m committed to, I think at least for the time being, that, service-learning is my way to be a social justice educator.” She reaffirmed her commitment to the functional area by saying:

There’s no way, in hell, I say this now, there’s no way that I’m moving to another functional area in terms of like, uhm, student programming or uh, residence life, or any of those major fraternity or sorority life. You know, I’m just not interested. That’s not why I’m here.

Despite this commitment, Bethany also struggles with some aspects of community engagement in higher education:

I’ve also, starting to have all of these issues with, really in service-learning we’re pretty much just using the community to like, get our students to a level where we can break down some social stereotypes and systems… And so I’m struggling with that as a, you know, the problematic. For people who want to do social justice work [we are often] using people who are in vulnerable uh, situations.

In elaborating on this, Bethany thinks:
Where my question and concern is coming in is, like, if I was sending my student leaders in there, I know that they’re going in there with like, a mindset that I feel comfortable with. I don’t know about my participants, because there are so many of them, and uhm, you know, I don’t work with them on a regular basis, so I think that’s where my, where my struggle is, is are we doing way more on the charity end than in the real like, service, mutuality, etcetera.

Summary. Bethany’s upbringing, specifically the faiths of her mother and father as well as her mother and sister’s prior experiences with service, prompted her to become involved in service and service-learning programs at her undergraduate institution. There, she immersed herself in these experiences and developed her ability to facilitate learning and development around service through a social justice perspective focusing on identity. Her experiences as an undergraduate, both those that followed best practices as well as those that she found lacking in their approach, were a driving force in perpetuating her commitment to engaging others in service through her post-baccalaureate years.

Bethany has a commitment to service-learning as a functional area within student affairs, through a deeper desire to engage in education for social justice within higher education. She is beginning to struggle with sending untrained students in to the community and the harm that this may be causing. She also believes that service-learning is often based on taking advantage of community organizations and individuals in vulnerable populations to advance student learning. Despite these internal struggles, she remains committed to service-learning as her avenue for advancing social justice.
Nora identifies as a White, upper middle class female, and is in her late 20’s. She has a number of older siblings in whose footsteps she was able to follow and a large extended family who serves as a support system. Unlike the other participants, she attended an out-of-state, public liberal arts college. Partially as a result of her professional experiences before attending graduate school, Nora is the only participant who does not want to continue in community engagement, yet her past experiences convey to employers her ability to successfully coordinate service experiences for students, leading her to continually find herself working with service programs despite her desire to take on more general responsibilities.

Youth: “I always liked working with younger kids.” Nora shared very little about her years before college, focusing mostly on her summers as a camp counselor, stating:

I always liked working with younger kids so I was always the counselor that was like, in the, I lived with 6 to 8 year old girls every summer uhm, overnight camp too. So really dealing with the younger kids I really uhm, felt like I had a knack for it.

Partially as a result of this experience, Nora developed a passion for working with children and “part of it is… you know, how do you work with kids? Right? You become a teacher.” However, perhaps in retrospect, Nora realized that “what I liked more and more was working with the other counselors. Like, being a mentor, connecting in that way, like being a leader among my peers uhm, and trying to teach you know, others what
I had done.” Still, Nora entered her undergraduate education with the intent to pursue a degree in elementary education.

*Undergraduate years: “[It] really was a sort of A or B moment.”* Nora shared:

I remember specifically having this like, really sassy attitude when… I started college that I wasn’t going to join anything. And I had joined so much in high school. I was so over it. I’m not going to join any clubs, just forget it. … and then I had friends, [from] my residence hall… who were volunteering… and they were just like “Hey, do you want to come play with kids for an hour?” and I was just like, “Yeah!” And then from then that was it… So it was really this like, again, one of those moments where… I can still remember it so vividly… And then from then on I was hooked.

The program that Nora’s friends suggested that she join was particularly interesting to her since at the time in her life as she was still planning on becoming a teacher and she “really liked working with kids.” Later Nora began to think that her decision to pursue a career in education may have partially been “just in lack of a better answer” and that, although she enjoyed working with children, “it really was clear that I liked working with them outside of the classroom.” Upon deciding she no longer wanted to pursue a career in education, Nora talked with her mother, a career counselor at a university in her hometown, who “basically told me, she goes, ‘it doesn’t matter what you major in. Just major in something you enjoy and then you’ll figure it out all later.’” As a result, Nora continued to pursue her primary major, geography, an intellectual area that “I loved… but I really didn’t really see myself in that field either.”
Nora became further involved in the service organization she had joined her first year of college. She described the decision to apply for a student staff position within the service organization as a turning point in putting her on her current path. She had not intended to apply for the position; however the student affairs professional coordinating the program called her and asked her to apply. Nora stated:

That phone call you know, really was a sort of A or B moment, you know. I was either going to go abroad or I was going to take this job. And I took the job…

And that really is a moment, an actual moment that I’ve always looked to as really putting me on the path I am now… if I hadn’t taken that phone call… or listened, or like, really taken that to heart, I would have gone abroad and that would have just led me down a different path. So not that anything’s better or worse, but, I wouldn’t have ended up being director of [the organization] and then kind of moving on to this and it’s been that experience that has gotten me every other job, you know?

The majority of Nora’s participation in this organization involved direct service through “a halfway house basically for abused mothers and their families, so a way to keep the families together.” The women who required the services of this organization were often experiencing homelessness and were unemployed. Nora and the other students involved with this organization “would watch these kids while the moms had meetings or you know, [attended a] resume [writing] session.” Throughout her college years, Nora remained committed to this service site despite the different options within the
overarching program. Through her participation, Nora was able to build connections with the families she worked with:

I … personally was able to follow one family through their four years going through the program as well as help they ended up in a Habitat [for Humanity] house, and I was able to help build their house. … And it was just so cool, right, to be able to feel like you are a part of this persons, uhm growth and being able to help them get back on their feet.

In addition to her involvement with this service organization during her undergraduate experience, Nora shared that she “really remember[s] uh, us all being very involved in other peoples stuff too. So even if I wasn’t a member of a club or organization I would end up like attending a lot of things or helping out.” Through this culture amongst the student leaders on her campus, she became involved in the yearbook, served as an assistant stage manager, and often helped with ceremonies for an honors society.

The stories shared by Nora do not provide enough information to suggest her undergraduate orientation to service. Her experiences working with a domestic violence shelter suggest that through this experience she was exposed to the interconnections between violence, homelessness, and poverty. Further, the longevity of her (and the institutions) relationship with the agency indicates a value in maintaining mutually benefitting relationships. Although Nora did not share how her service experiences may have influenced her own reflexive thinking about these social issues or how her identities may have been influenced by this involvement, it is still possible that Nora participated in discussions that facilitated reflection on these issues.
Postponing student affairs: “I was having none of it.” Nora first learned of student affairs “after I was already being paid to be in the student activities office, that my assistant director who… was like, you should do this. You should look in to this. I think it might have been my junior year.” Despite her mother working on a college campus in career services, Nora never saw this as a potential career until it was suggested to her. Part of the draw for Nora to pursue student affairs was that “I remember liking so much what I did in college. So part of it is that idea that, ‘Oh, I can keep doing this.’” Additionally, Nora “loved it, I loved planning these big events, I loved working with other students.”

But when the assistant director of student activities told her:

That I had to get a master’s [degree], and I was having none of it. I did not want anything to do with a master’s, I was over school and so… when I graduated from college, the seed had been planted about student affairs but it wasn’t taking yet, and I moved back closer home… And eventually got a job in non-profit there.

Nora’s path to her position at the non-profit after her undergraduate work was fraught with anxiety: “I get like, one hive at a time.” Reflecting on her experience “I always tell people… I’m like graduating from college is the worst.” Part of why this experience was so stressful for Nora was because:

Everything before had been set out. Like, even for me for college… that’s set right. That’s not like a new experience. I’m even the fourth kid in my family so, it was like, ok, just do whatever everybody else does. And this was the first time
that I’m just like, had to start really making like, real decisions that had like, immediate financial implications in my life.

Nora moved to a city in the Midwest and signed a lease before she had found employment. She spent six months juggling temping for various non-profits and working for a number of different families as a nanny. One of her temporary jobs coincided with the time “the front desk person quit and so I applied for that job and got that job. And then I just kind of, and I stayed there for four years.” At this non-profit, Nora was able to move up and hold a number of different positions, eventually finding her way to the service events department where she organized and facilitated service opportunities for companies throughout the city. She believes that at least in part “I got the uh, [non-profit] job because of my experience in college” planning and organizing service events.

Nora enjoyed her time organizing service events and her co-workers whom she described as “ambitious, young, uhm, and activism was a part of a lot of peoples motivation for working [there].” Despite enjoying her office and her position, Nora shared that she began to struggle with continuously taking volunteers to lower-income communities where:

You paint and you think and you keep talking and you write and you say like, what a big difference a clean school makes, and it does, but not for the, I mean like, that’s great that we were able to paint it, but like, I mean [the city is] a mess. Like these kids are getting shot.

Nora’s years in this role eventually began to lead her to wonder what difference her work was truly making in the community. She recognized that her work was not addressing the
root causes of the issues in the community and by extension not contributing or impacting change.

In part because of her frustrations with her work and also some highly publicized, successful large scale events she coordinated, she felt that eventually she “kind of got to that moment like, what do I really wanna do next?” Since “there didn’t seem to be any movement on me being promoted or considered” for an open position at the organization, Nora began applying to “a dozen or so” positions within student affairs “because I didn’t know if I wanted to do this, my goal would have been to get a job in the field and then see… cause I was a little bit of a chicken about it.” Although Nora did get a number of interviews for positions, she never received an offer.

Around the same time:

My niece was born and… it’s that realization, well I’m not married, I don’t have a kid, I don’t have these same responsibilities. My brother does. I can do whatever I want. And then that’s what really got me to apply to [Graduate School] to move.

She applied to two graduate programs in student affairs and eventually “the decision to go… came down to the fact that I got a lot of financial help. …If I hadn’t gotten an assistantship I probably wouldn’t have gone when I did.”

Graduate school: “‘Never mind about that job you think you are applying for.’”

Nora applied to her graduate program based on the recommendation of a staff member with whom she had been close at her undergraduate institution. This mentor connected her with the Director of Campus Activities at this institution and Nora:
Applied for a graduate assistantship and it was I think a graduate assistantship in Greek Life… I had no Greek Life experience going in to this. So I’m at the interview and [my future supervisor] comes up and she was like, ‘Oh, I see that you worked in volunteer programs.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, yeah.’ And so we sit down and she’s like, ‘Never mind about that job you think you are applying for.’… What happened was about a couple weeks before my interview, volunteer programs all of a sudden came in to the lap of student activities. It was like [the former office for service] fell apart or imploded and so they didn’t know what to do. And like, the same day my old assistant director e-mailed [them] my resume, and here’s this like, volunteer programs gets me the foot in the door.

Although Nora was excited and ultimately accepted the position as a part-time assistantship, she stated “I wanted to be in student activities uhm, not necessarily community service.” Similarly, she stated that “my intent was to try to get a more generalized position, [but] they hired me on as a part time graduate assistant to uhm, run volunteer programs.”

Nora noted that her academic experience always felt “in transition,” and shared that she did not realize that her program had a social justice focus until “halfway through my first year.” In comparison to the other periods of her life, Nora shared less about her graduate years. She shared anecdotes about her transition from a team-oriented office environment to a more silo-ed and specialized student activities office, as well as the innovative ways she became involved on campus to ensure her financial needs were met.
The latter set of stories suggests the lasting impact of Nora’s financial stress upon her undergraduate graduation.

Job search: “I wasn’t gonna mess.” Again, perhaps in part as a result of her financial stress upon graduating from her undergraduate institution, Nora approached her job search after her master’s program with intent and dedication. “I started applying in like, October, November, and not that I got any of those jobs but just like, the process, going through the process sometimes made it feel, made me feel better about it.” She added “no way that I care about institutional fit in a job. I’m gonna figure out how to get a job.”

For Nora, even though she did not care as much about institutional fit, she approached the job search with a renewed dedication to ending up in a more general position because “I went in to school wanting to work in Student Activities, and… I didn’t care where I landed [geographically] afterwards.” This approach, combined with advice from her supervisor who:

Gave me this really great mantra that I still use. It’s that you only have to make the decision that’s in front of you. So, like, the decision to apply became so much easier. Because I just, keep applying.

This led Nora to submit many applications that met her basic search criteria. Partially as a result of her summer internship abroad, Nora also applied for a full-time position at an American university in the Middle East:

I got an on campus interview. So uhm, so I was pretty stoked about that… Uh, they essentially, uhm, I’m trying to remember if it was directly or, they basically
asked me to stop job searching. And I told them that I was going to [The Placement Exchange]. Uhm, and then so we had one conversation when they offered me the on campus interview. And then, I didn’t hear from them… So a month after I had talked to them, they e-mailed me and rescinded the on campus offer.

Shortly before travelling to participate in TPE, Nora became aware of an open position, which would be conducting interviews at TPE after receiving an e-mail from an employer. She stated: “I don’t even think [he] signed it. It said like, you should apply for our job. And then like, that was it. Like really, and I was like, OK.” Although the position was focused on community service, Nora applied and interviewed for the position. She was open and intentional with her future supervisor during the job search:

I remember being like… I want to work in student activities, so, you know, what kind of experiences will I be able to get, uhm, to keep moving me in that direction as opposed to like, a director of service-learning?

She eventually accepted the position despite the fact that her “intent was not to expressly get a full time community service based position. But it keeps happening. But I enjoy it.” She shared that community service “has been a thread through which I have been able to continue with student affairs even though it’s not necessarily always my goal to continue in it.”

*Current position: “Am I good enough to do this?”* Nora’s position is expressly working to advance a student–run program focused on community service. She spends a large amount of her time being present to provide advice and structure, as well as
introduce new ideas and concepts to her student leaders who are organizing service opportunities for other students. She’s been in her position less than one year, and she is still learning the ropes and figuring out how best to move the program forward while focusing on her own professional development.

Nora considers herself to be successful in her position “if I just don’t totally ruin this. … So, at the end of the day, if I don’t run the program in to the ground and I have developed, professionally, then that’s a success.” Further, “I think that’s part of the success, is how, how am I using my uhm, my influence and power for good.” She goes on to share that:

As far as the institution [is concerned with my success], uhm, I’m not sure that they give a crap what we do. … They like what I do, they like that its community service, they like that, I think, like they can say we have this organization, but other than that…

When discussing her concerns related to her position, Nora shared that much of her fear stems from the high quality of her students:

These like great, student leaders who are just so inspired and inspiring to me. And I just keep thinking to myself… how do I create those students? You know, [my predecessor] did… How do I create somebody who is going to be as passionate about this kind of work as uhm, these students… are… You know… am I good enough to do this?

Expanding on this idea, Nora was surprised by:
How much [the students] push back. Man! They are smart. And… they really challenge me and sometimes when I tell them uhm like, uh, stop asking all of these questions, even though they are really good questions and I should know the answer to them. But just, do what I tell you to do. My students do not just do what I tell them to do. And that’s sort of kind of goes back to like, what, like, how do I teach them that? Because like, these students are so great at questioning everything that I do, and I love that dynamic! I love like, going in to the meetings, even though I hate it like, in the moment, I love that like, I can go in and they are not afraid to be like, uh [Nora], you are an idiot. They don’t actually say that, uhm, but you can kind of see.

When working with her students, Nora states that “I really, try to get the students to think about like, what are the areas that we are missing?” As a result of asking questions such as this and drawing on students’ interests and strengths, the program she supervises is beginning to offer programming related to health, wellness, and food justice. Although Nora is committed to further expanding the scope and issues addressed by the students, she shared that:

You know, I’m not the person that will go out, and be like ‘Hey, you need to volunteer for this’ …that’s what my students are there for. You know, I’m there to help guide those students along in their leadership, uhm, not in their advocacy.

In part, this is a result of her previous experience coordinating volunteer programs, which Nora believes caused her to be:
Pretty jaded most of the time, [asking questions like] you know what is the mission of this organization, what are these volunteers actually doing, are they actually helping? ...I have painted hundreds of thousands of square feet of [urban] schools... And I don’t feel like I’ve made any real difference… Me painting their school isn’t doing anything. And I think, I do still carry a lot of that with me.

Nora also struggles with what she sees as an apparent mission-drift of non-profit agencies, stating, “there’s so many nonprofits that don’t do really anything close to their mission.”

Nora shared that these experiences have directly influenced her work with students through stating “but it’s good too I think to carry some of that with me and really uhm, challenge myself and my students about like, what are we really doing here? Like, how are we really helping?” Nora also shared:

I don’t really, get, I always call them like, your warm and fuzzies, like, I don’t get, [that] sort of feeling, that warm and fuzzy feeling as much anymore as I used to. But, I get that now from my students and seeing them experience all of those things.

These feelings around community service and non-profits also influence Nora’s relationships with others in the field to a certain extent: “I think sometimes I interact with people who are in this field too and they are just like, a lot more engaged than I am. And so sometimes I just feel like, uh, yeah, I don’t really buy it.” Instead, Nora focuses much of her concern and effort:
Especially with this student body, [on] like, work job readiness. …I think about that in how I’m conducting job interviews and how I’m helping them with resumes and how, cause that’s a lot more, a lot more are worried about how, you know, what job am I going to get after I graduate than they are sometimes about like, being civically minded. I think they will be but, you know, you need a job too.

Nora’s comments regarding the purpose and results of service continue to suggest that she may approach community engagement from a social justice perspective. In asking her students to critically examine “how are we really helping?” she is in essence asking them to reflect on the surface issues with which they are likely interacting, what the root causes are of these issues, and how their service may or may not be contributing to change. Throughout her stories and statements which suggest the challenges she faces in her work, Nora never mentioned how identity, hers, her students, or those of the community, influence her work, yet this absence does not necessarily mean that she does not have her students grapple with these questions.

*Future goals:* “I want to feel more passionate about it.” When I asked Nora about her future, she stated that “part of it gives me a panic attack and part of it’s like, I don’t know what’s going to happen.” She would like to be:

Closer to, to family. Again, all things you know, being just as they are now, four years from now. I think that I would try to intentionally move back… That has a lot more influence than I probably would have thought it would have had.

Later she shared:
I don’t have a contract but… [after four years], I should be moving out. So uhm, you know, really my focus is getting as much experience as I can. I want this to feel boring… I want to kind of like, just suck all of the experience out of this.

In thinking about future positions she stated “I do want to be a practitioner” and “I would like to move towards… [being a] Director of Student Activities.” She has “been also looking and thinking about Ph.D. programs or Ed.D. programs,” because “one, I like the idea of the academic challenge, uhm, two, uh, I, I know that it will be necessary at some point, for me to have it, so, trying to get it while I can.”

In discussing why she doesn’t want to continue along the line of student affairs positions that engage students with the community, Nora first stated that “Uhm, I would not at this point take a job as the director of a service-learning or dir- or you know, student, community engagement center. Uhm, because that is not what I want to do.” In expanding on why this is, Nora shared that community engagement positions have:

The additional challenge… that I probably would if I stayed on this path, is service-learning and working with faculty… I think that, that has got to be a huge challenge… because this, what I’m seeing here is that you have a lot of professors saying, “Oh, I want to do service-learning,” and it’s not. It’s like a community service component of, to a classroom and not really connected to the curriculum. But… the person who does that here, like doesn’t really have that much influence to change that. They’re faculty; they can do what they want.

This statement shows Nora’s understanding of different approaches to service and her
belief in the purpose of community engagement in the academic context. She indicated through this statement that she may be aware of a larger conversation around service-learning and the best practices associated with the pedagogy.

She also returned to her previous belief that she has become “jaded,” partially as a result of her past work experience:

I think that, that is what is driving me away from this service-learning track for this, is because I don’t think that I can keep faking it. …But if I were to continue in this, it’s going to be harder and harder to be a true advocate for social causes when I wasn’t the person who felt the passion for those social causes. …I don’t think that I’m the person to inspire a lot of that. Although I can encourage it… Part of me thinks that I wouldn’t be …a good role model for people to do that stuff when I’m not… I think I’m a very good advisor and I love working with my students but, if I’m gonna continue in this, if I’m going to make this a full-time, you know, life long career… I want to feel more passionate about it.

This statement in particular struck me as powerful. It indicates a desire for Nora to be authentic with her students and to find a position or a strand in student affairs with which she is able to more closely align her personal values and goals. Through this statement, Nora seems to be suggesting that there may be an unspoken assumption within student affairs that only certain individuals are suited to hold positions within some functional areas; that being an effective practitioner involves more than being able to complete the tasks at hand and effectively advise students. Further, this statement also suggests that perhaps there are unspoken qualifications amongst new professionals regarding their
ability to successfully do the work entailed in these positions. Those that find themselves in the functional area who do not meet these unspoken qualifications need to “fake” their passion for some aspects within the functional area. Despite her position largely consisting of advising students in event planning and program development, this statement indicates her belief that there is something about community engagement that makes it distinctly different from other student activities positions with similar logistical responsibilities. Whatever the specific, differentiating factor is to Nora, not having this is enough to reconsider her place within student affairs, despite years of professional experience.

**Summary.** Nora’s past experiences, both her involvement in service as an undergraduate and her difficulty in finding a job after her undergraduate graduation have had a distinct influence in her path to her current position. As a result of her past professional experiences and skills that she can bring to a position, Nora continues to find herself in community service positions, despite her desire to pursue more general student activities positions. Partially because the stress of unemployment and the potential financial implications this has entailed for her in the past, Nora may have been influenced to apply for and accept a position in community engagement more so than she would have if she had easily found full-time employment upon her undergraduate graduation.

Nora’s intention to leave this functional area is guided in part by her feelings of being “jaded” by the mission-drift of non-profit agencies as well as what she believes much community service programming accomplishes. As a result of her years of experience with community service, Nora has seen the lack of change or “results” of her
previous activities, leading her to struggle with service that does not seem to address the root causes or true issues evident in communities. Partially as a result of her disillusionment with service, she feels that students who are passionate about social issues deserve to be mentored and advised by a student affairs professional who can better inspire students to think more deeply about their work.

**Rochelle: Intentionality and Societal Responsibility**

Rochelle was a first generation college student and attended the large, flagship public institution in her state for her undergraduate education. She identifies as female and multi-ethnic, “both White and Asian,” and is in her mid-20s. Her journey, as presented below, draws attention to Rochelle’s prior experiences that have developed her passion to provide educational experiences for college students through community engagement programs within higher education that develop students’ understanding of their place within society, leadership, and their ability to contribute to their local communities.

*Youth: “There was an obvious moment.”* Rochelle became interested in helping others and engaging with her communit(ies) at a relatively young age, after seeing her brother struggle with cancer. She spent time watching the doctors and nurses who cared for her brother, sharing that “when you’re 5 or 6 years old, like, that’s the most… direct way you see somebody helping someone you love.” This admiration led Rochelle to consider career paths that are traditionally considered helping fields, such as becoming a doctor herself and teaching when she was in high school. She shared that “I want to help people, and I wanna get involved in other people’s lives.” She became involved in
community service and raising awareness in high school after some of her friends passed away as a result of alcohol and other drug use. Rochelle traced a probable beginning to her path towards facilitating community engagement amongst college students to her involvement and friends in high school:

I think there was an obvious moment in high school where I didn’t need to be doing community service; it wasn’t required. … All my friends were doing it and so if I wanted to be with my friends I was going there, you know. It was just a conscious decision that I made that this is something that is important to me and I want to spend my time doing it.

This engagement, combined with Rochelle’s lack of clear direction about her future professional and academic goals as she entered college, led her to apply for a scholars program at her undergraduate institution focused on leadership and service. Rochelle shared that she chose this scholars program over other more academically focused programs because:

I didn’t want to make that commitment in case I changed my mind about what I wanted to study. … The community service aspect really felt more at home to me and more accepting to me of whatever I turned into in college I would still fit there.

Undergraduate years: “I can provide that amazing experience for other people.” Rochelle became a part of the scholars’ community from her first days as a college student. She stated that getting accepted to the scholars program “decided my college experience, which is interesting to think of it that way.” She continued:
I think [the scholars program] made a huge difference in continuing my community service and providing a safe place where there were other people who supported you in doing community service. Because I think if I would have ended up in… a residence hall and not in a place where everyone was doing it, I probably wouldn’t have taken the initiative to get involved myself.

Rochelle’s involvement in service prior to college as well as her experiences watching doctors provide direct care for her brother may have contributed to the decisions she made to engage in service opportunities as an undergraduate which largely focused on providing direct service or assistance. While in college, Rochelle routinely volunteered in the area surrounding campus at a local food pantry, organizing street clean-ups, as well as helped to pilot a co-curricular leadership consulting program, coordinated a large, one-day service event, and served as the philanthropy chair for her sorority, through which she remembered making fleece blankets for hospitalized children. For Rochelle, these experiences reflected how she “was just trying to find a way that I would fit into society and contribute to it.”

Rochelle held a paid position in a student affairs office unrelated to service or volunteerism. She shared that when considering applying for the job “I was like, well this is just a job that’s close to home that I could do very easily and the people are nice.” Although Rochelle was driven and focused in her co-curricular activities, academically she lacked a specific plan: “it’s sort of hilarious like, cause I’m a very like, I’m a very Type A personality. For me to have not had a plan until my senior year of college, to not
Rochelle found support and motivation to enter the field from three student affairs professionals with whom she interacted, although each influenced her in different ways. She found motivation from the advisor of her scholars program, whom she described as being “very passionate. She’s very inspirational.” Rochelle attributes some of her commitment to community service as a result of seeing “how fulfilling it was for her.” Her supervisor was a motivator for her choosing to apply and subsequently attend the institution where she received her master’s degree. A third student affairs staff member with whom Rochelle was connected in a variety of different contexts, is the individual that Rochelle credits most with prompting her to consider the field of student affairs: “It was really [her] that said, this is something you can do for your job. And you should.”

For Rochelle, her initial draw to the field was partially because:

I think as a first generation college student… student affairs uhm, was the most appealing to me because in the most general sense I could say, I’ve had an amazing experience and I can provide that amazing experience for other people who otherwise would just be going to classes and otherwise wouldn’t have that fulfillment.

Rochelle’s statement regarding attaining fulfillment through co-curricular engagement suggests that although she was drawn to direct service experiences that seem structured to meet immediate needs, suggesting a charity orientation to service, her passion to remain involved stemmed from the internal results of her efforts. Further, the service activities
that Rochelle shared that she engaged in seem to stem from the identification of the needs of the community, perhaps suggesting that as an undergraduate she approached her involvement in the community from a deficiency perspective. This may have been influenced by her brother’s experience with cancer and his very specific needs that only highly trained doctors could provide.

Still, Rochelle was not interested in pursuing a number of the traditional functional areas within student affairs. The advisor who prompted her to consider entering the field also spoke with Rochelle about her ability to focus professionally on service and community engagement. As a result, Rochelle “was able to say, I want to do this but only if I can do that community engagement piece.” In part, this is because Rochelle believes:

I thought that it was incredibly important for the future in general for [students] during [college] to understand what citizenship meant, uhm and what it means to contribute to your society and why choosing an occupation or choosing your career is more than just a way for you to do something you enjoy or make money. Since her degree “was not super useful, and so it was like, well, I guess I’m going to go find something a little bit more practical” and “the national trend was kind of, let’s go and get more education.” In detailing which aspects of the field Rochelle found most enticing, she stated “I guess for me it was more about the functional area and so uhm, I was most interested in getting… to a place where I can work with college students to get involved with service and that, you know a great way to do that is through student affairs.
Rochelle’s experiences with service led her to consider the functional area; beginning her graduate education required her to shift from the specific to the general.

*Graduate school:* “The point is to help the students understand how to fit in with *that community.***” During graduate school, Rochelle held an assistantship coordinating community service experiences for students. She was responsible for a variety of projects, many of which involved developing and maintaining relationships with community agencies. Rochelle shared that she likes “being able to work with students to help them like, click and say, this is how I can fit my passions into helping the community.” In pursuing this approach to her work, she experienced occasional conflict with her assistantship supervisor over the focus of their work:

> It was difficult because her main goal was to uhm, serve the community. She cared about the community partners; she wanted everything to be about the community. Whereas I’m coming in learning every day that this is about the students and about the experience for the students. And yes, like, we should be meeting the needs of the community and not going out saying ‘I’m going to do this service for you!’ even though they don’t need it. But, the point is to help the students understand how to fit in with that community and learn what their role is in society.

She continued to state that her supervisor was “the opposite of what I am learning.” The frustration that Rochelle shared through this portion of our conversation highlights the importance of congruence between a professional’s philosophy of service in higher education and that of the office or institution in which they work. Rochelle believed that
the frustration she experienced in the challenges resulting from the different orientation she held from her assistantship supervisor may have been related to her supervisors background, which was not in higher education. Through this process Rochelle developed a mentoring relationship with another student affairs professional in the office who was able to offer guidance and support as Rochelle navigated this relationship.

While in her master’s program, Rochelle held two other internships, one focusing on career services at a nearby community college and another focused on the transfer student experience, in addition to pursuing an experience abroad over the summer. She discussed the quality of the professors in her program, and their ability to teach theory and allow students to focus on their particular areas of interest.

Rochelle perceived most students in her program entered with a specific functional area in mind that they wanted to pursue professionally and believed that her professors recognized this as well. She shared that the professors taught:

Knowing that everybody came because they loved Greek life or they loved Study Abroad; it’s not because they loved student affairs in general. It’s because of that one thing, and you go to class so that you learn to love student affairs in general, but obviously you’re there for one specific reason.

Job search: “I did turn down jobs.” In talking about her job search, Rochelle shared that where she received her graduate degree appeared to be very important to potential employers:

Having a degree from [my graduate institution] and [the program] being a well-known program helped me a lot to get interviews. …It’s terrible but it really, it
really was. I had a lot of calls uhm, because people were interested in you know, checking out somebody from [my institution], and so that in itself was very helpful and I was very thankful for that.

When reviewing position descriptions, Rochelle shared that she had a general approach within the functional area of community engagement, but she:

Got most excited and was most interested when they connected [community service and leadership] and when that office did both and when my position would be managing both of those aspects. Because I think they are so integrated… and it’s so important for students to recognize the close connection between the two.

Additionally, the geographic location of the institution where she held her graduate assistantship partially influenced her job search:

I was very interested typically in jobs in more urban areas where I felt like I could make lots of connections with community partners. Uhm, where I felt like there were very salient community issues and so like, not to say that there weren’t issues [where my assistantship was], but, there weren’t issues [there]. It was like, ‘Let’s clean up the park!’ …Whereas here, we have a huge HIV/AIDS problem, we have huge gaps between the extremely wealthy and the extremely poor. So it was very attractive to me to come to a place where it felt like the work I was doing and the work that I was encouraging students to do uhm, really made a difference.
Rochelle was primarily interested in areas where a number of other schools were located, as she was conducting a dual job search with her boyfriend, who is also a student affairs professional. Ultimately, Rochelle was offered a number of positions and:

I did turn down jobs because I thought they weren’t a good fit. And a lot of people were like “Wow, you’re really stupid.” But, you know, I’m happy now that I waited and found a job that really fit me and that I felt was a good place for me to relocate.

It is likely that Rochelle’s experience in her assistantship influenced her job search considerably. After having a supervisor for two years who Rochelle felt did not afford her the opportunity to express her professional identity in the way that Rochelle had hoped, she likely took very seriously the idea of institutional and office fit during her job search, leading her to turn down positions. Rochelle accepted her current position in part because her supervisor “was very invested uh, in community service and not, not the community, but you know the community service aspect of college,” suggesting that Rochelle had found a better fit in terms of office philosophical orientation to service and her shared focus on holistically developing students. Her boyfriend chose to follow her, noting “it was sort of a struggle because… there were a few months where I was working and he was home doing my laundry.” Still, Rochelle saw an old professor of hers at a professional conference the following year who “said, ‘You are my example of your cohort of a person who waited way too long but ended up with their perfect job.’”

*Current position:* “I’m happy in this position; I like this job.” Rochelle has held her current position for a little over a year and a half. Primarily, she is charged with
supporting student organizations with a community service mission, assisting in the coordination of service projects and events across the institution, and facilitating leadership programs. Rochelle discussed her expectations coming in to her position. Importantly, “my supervisor was also new” so “I was just sort of thrown in to it, and he just sort of said, here are the programs that I can’t manage right now, you can manage them.” As a result:

My impression of what I was going to be doing is much different than what I’m actually doing, which is, you know, it’s fine... Coming in to it I thought it was going to be much less hands on, that a lot of it would be students kind of planning everything and uhm, out of student organizations and I would just be overseeing it.

In discussing the challenges she has faced since starting her first full-time professional position, Rochelle stated:

One thing that was hard for me coming in was navigating politics of the university. …I kind of came in to this position thinking ok, I’m not the boss but, if I see something wrong I’m gonna say it, and you know I’m entitled to say what I think or to express concern, and that’s not always the case… I work with a lot higher-up people than I used to, and it’s been difficult I think learning how to navigate, what to say and when to say it and what’s appropriate and what’s not appropriate and what are they aware of and what should I not be talking about.

In discussing the challenges of working with students, Rochelle shared that she has continued to learn “that line between I’m friendly with my students but I’m not their
friend… It’s been difficult you know you spend a lot of time with your students and you start forming relationships with them…” In discussing this further, Rochelle stated:

I think the nature of working in community service kind of forges that bond between people right. So, when you’re talking about your passion and the things that you want to change in the world with your students, it’s like, we’re friends, we care about each other, we care about the world, we’re going to save it.

Her assertion that the programs and initiatives she coordinates are attempting to “save” the world further indicates Rochelle’s passion and commitment to community engagement. Rochelle shared that how she defines success in her current position has changed after almost two years of professional experience:

I would never say this, before coming in to the job, but… I know that I feel most successful at the end of the day when my students are happy… when they’re not upset or irritated or overwhelmed. …[Before starting] I think I would have said something more general along the lines of success is forging community relationships and having lots of you know, community partners who look upon me as a resource to connect with students and you know, having students become engaged with the community.

Rochelle shared that at times it is difficult to meet this definition of success, even though she finds it “basic.” She shared that:

The students who are here 20 hours a week… and the people who frankly are more invested in this office and our mission and what we do, I think the, it’s like the more you know the more concerned you are because you know that there is so
much more to do. Uhm, and there’s so much more that we could do, and so, I think it’s difficult with those students, keeping them happy and making them feel successful.

Rochelle also stated “there’s always something to do, there’s always an issue out there, there’s always somebody that needs help.” These two statements suggest that students’ happiness and tangible benefits provided to the community are key contributors to a sense of urgency she finds in her work.

Additionally, Rochelle recognizes that her success is viewed differently depending on one’s role within the institution. Although she feels that her supervisor shares her definition of success, she stated that the Vice President for Student Affairs “is very data heavy. She wants to know numbers.” These conflicting approaches to telling the story of her success have the potential to later result in feeling a lack of perceived value in her work.

Future goals: “I have no idea where I’ll be.” As Rochelle considers her future and where she would like to move professionally, she still feels that her place is within community engagement and fostering learning experiences through service. She stated that “not that it’s not worthwhile work, but like you know, residence life, or like, student activities... It’s like, cool, good for you. It’s not for me.” Instead, Rochelle is:

Not so much concerned about what my position is next, I’m more concerned about staying in this functional area. …I’m not going to say that I want to be a director in three to five years. I have no idea where I’ll be, but this is the kind of
work that I want to be doing and this is the kind of city that I want to be working in.

Although Rochelle’s passion lies within the particular functional area of community engagement in higher education, she was able to share influential aspects of her job that came to her mind when we discussed the challenges of persisting and continuing to do this work. For example, Rochelle:

Never thought that I would want a job where I just don’t, I don’t have to invest my heart and soul in to it. You know? But, even in the few years that I’ve been doing this, I’m tired. It’s a lot of work and it sucks a lot out of you and you go home and you’re thinking about it and when you’re asleep you’re dreaming about it. And you know, it’s exhausting… I’m wondering that if there is a way where you can work a job where you feel fulfilled but you’re not constantly exasperated and tired and stressed out and feeling like, you’re never doing enough.

Additionally, Rochelle mentioned feelings of isolation that seem to be contributing in some ways to her sense of fulfillment in her current location, stating: “it’s very superficial, uhm, people don’t care about the environment or the people around them, they care about themselves and their Gucci bags.” Given the major metropolitan area in which Rochelle is located, this statement suggests that Rochelle has in mind a specific image of a colleague or other professional whose efforts she believes to be in line with her own. Further, this statement suggests that Rochelle approaches her work with a mentality of providing for and not working with her community partners, who likely do care about the members of the community. Without an expanded definition and openness
to building relationships with those engaging in similar work but with different orientation or experiences, Rochelle may continue to experience feelings of isolation that may contribute to eventual burnout.

I asked Rochelle to consider her professional future over the next few years. Rochelle expanded on the statement she had made earlier regarding the different functional areas within student affairs. She stated that she has:

No interest in doing any other aspect of student affairs to be completely honest. I, I would love to work in a city that’s a city, that’s not, you know a small rural town. …I really wanna be in a city where people are aligned with my values and what I care about. And I don’t want to be constantly fighting an uphill battle. [Because] it’s hard to be alone. It’s hard to feel like I’m motivating these students to get so excited and to learn about these things so that they can move away and work on them somewhere else.

Finally, Rochelle does not have a clear idea about where she would like her career to progress over time, although she is able to narrow some of her options by identifying what she does not want in her future positions:

One of my biggest fears with working in student affairs is that as you move up you inherently work less directly with students. …I don’t have any desire to do those [administrative] things. And when I talk to people and they are like, “I want to be a Vice President.” I’m like, “Oh, that sounds awful. Have fun.” …The more I watch [the Vice President for Student Affairs], the more I’m like, that, that does not look like what I want to do.
Without a clear path that she has decided on for herself, Rochelle recognized the possibility that she may move towards non-profit work or leave student affairs to enter the food industry with her father who has suggested that they open a restaurant together. For Rochelle, leaving the field is seen as a potential option, but she is committed to community engagement in higher education for the foreseeable future.

Summary. Rochelle began engaging in leadership and community service early on in her life as a result of some profound experiences involving her brother. For Rochelle, pursuing community engagement within higher education has been an intentional, strategic, and a personal choice driven by her personal values and prior experiences. Through her involvement with a residential scholar’s program at her undergraduate institution, Rochelle continued to pursue opportunities and develop her passion for helping others. She was able to advance her leadership and skills, building her capacity to engage others, learn more about the profession, and envision student affairs and community engagement as a future professional base for herself and is determined and goal-oriented in her professional desire to continue to pursue these types of positions.

Rochelle mentioned a number of times student’s learning and leadership development as the aspect of her position that is most important to her. Rochelle conveyed a belief that college is a time in an individuals’ life that, at least in part, is about engaging with the community to learn more about oneself and society. This belief may have led Rochelle to pursue student affairs over non-profit volunteer management in her goal to engage students in their community.
Rochelle discussed her connection to her work in a way that suggests she considers her career closely intertwined with how she perceives herself as an individual. The challenges she faces that may influence persistence were factors such as emotional investment in her work, as well as the general trend in student affairs to work less directly with students as one advances in their career.

She does not have a long-term professional goal in mind, as she could not identify a position beyond director of a service and leadership office that still engages students with the community and provides opportunities for students to reflect on their responsibility to society. This may give her some uncertainty about how to structure her current experiences and seek out additional opportunities to develop skills that will assist in her professional advancement. Given Rochelle’s focus on change within the individual student and her dedication to helping the members of the local community, it remains to be seen if Rochelle will become disillusioned with the lack of visible community change that will likely result from her work and how this will influence her persistence.

**Ryan: Ambitious and Culture Changing**

Ryan was also a first-generation college student and identifies as being from a lower socio-economic status. He attended the large, flagship public institution in his home state. He is in his mid-20’s, identifies as gay male, and as “biracial, Latino, White.” As Ryan’s narrative will show, he has been ambitious and focused on leadership opportunities since his early undergraduate years. As a result of these experiences and aspects of his identity, Ryan developed a passion around social justice and leadership that
he has infused into his current position. In his role, Ryan has been engaged in a two-year process of shifting the culture of his office to represent a more social justice approach to community engagement, reflecting both his internal values and his ambitious nature.

Ryan is the only participant who expressed a clear path for their future. In pursuit of this he has applied for doctoral programs as he hopes to join the faculty.

*Youth: “I know well what education does for someone.”* When he was younger, the first thing Ryan “wanted to be was a teacher… and then some friend made me wanna be like, the president and then I wanted to be a lawyer, and then a journalist. You know it switched a little bit.” Between each of these experiences the common trend for Ryan was that he “wanted to have some ability to communicate and develop influence.”

For Ryan, pursuing college, contemplating becoming a teacher, and later entering student affairs were decisions that were driven at least in part by his identity as a:

First generation college student. And so, I know well what education does for someone. You know, I’m the only person in my family who is still really educated, and so I look at my life and theirs and I can see the power of education.

Ryan also shared that “growing up and with my family and seeing, the needs of others” prompted him to develop and interest and passion in engaging in service for social justice, suggesting a focus on the community and groups of individuals.

*Undergraduate years: “I was tossed in to a leadership role.”* During college, Ryan was a highly involved student. His experiences started from the moment he stepped on campus as a member of a scholars program and volunteered to welcome “folks on campus, I came early. I was like, you know, I might as well go. And the
reason I did it was because I was like, I’ll get to pick what bunk I want.” Through this experience, Ryan met another student who:

Was like, you know, ‘You should come and you know, see what [the residence hall council is] like,’ and I was like ‘Oh, kay. Sure.’ So I went to a …meeting, and uhm, I liked it, and… so I ran and applied and was selected.

Later that year during his involvement with this organization:

The executive board asked me to step in to the role of president, which was very odd and very scary as a first generation college student... Uhm, so anyways, I did, and I became, sort of the president of [the organization], and I did that for two years.

Through his involvement in the residence hall council, Ryan met and connected with a student affairs professional who advised the organization and who “was hugely uhm, influential to my life.” Specifically Ryan mentioned that his advisor:

Took me under his wing as a first generation college student and gave me incredible opportunities with a lot of very hard check-ups… I was a diamond in the rough, as he used to say. We had some pretty challenging conversations...

Academically, Ryan focused on “strategic communication, which was a combination of public relations and advertising. …[I also] minored in sociology, and I had a temporary minor in dance, but I didn’t finish it.” His academic focus is representative of Ryan’s prior career interests that primarily focused on communication and influence.

In addition to his leadership role with the residence hall council, Ryan was also held three different roles within orientation programs during his undergraduate
experience, as well as participant and leadership roles in the university’s annual dance marathon, Alternative Breaks, an honorary society, an organization that provide service to the university, participated in theater troupes, and served as the first Leadership and Service intern through student activities. Ryan was also afforded the unique experience of “sit[ting] on the planning committee for the current [center for leadership and service]. Uhm, and so it was very cool to work with student affairs staff there and develop these initiatives,” as the new center was being developed. Many of these leadership positions, such as working for orientation and his internship in Leadership and Service were paid student employment opportunities. Ryan also held a position as “an RA but I was fired, uhm midway through.”

In speaking about how Ryan came to understand that student affairs is a profession, he stated:

I think that when I was younger I realized I wanted to do what [my advisors] did. And I think it was sort of like a, very organic. It was never like, them being like, [Ryan], FYI there’s this new field here. It was not like that.

Ryan’s advisor through the residence hall council:

Showed me, what student affairs was like, and …he challenged me to organize that group as if I was a student affairs educator... And so, very young I knew that this was an opportunity through my conversations with [him]… so, it just sort of built of over time that I realized that’s why I wanted to go into student affairs.

Through these varied experiences in student affairs, Ryan was exposed to professionals across a number of different functional areas, which may have contributed to Ryan
developing an understanding of the field earlier than the other participants. For Ryan, one of the more memorable experiences he had as an undergraduate was serving as a trip leader through the alternative break program where he “led a group of students to New York City, and that was a really transformative experience for me. Uhm, and so that really, helped me to see the power of service.” Later he explained that the trip:

Was just really powerful because, one, I had gone on alternative breaks in the past, but, I was still fairly young and didn’t understand the gravity of the learning experience… when I was an alternative break trip leader… I was responsible in many ways for facilitating a learning experience for a group of students. … And it was just really powerful because we thought like, it was the first time I had really thought like a student affairs practitioner… We had pre [-trip] meetings and talked about the issues and stuff. …we [made] food for individuals living with chronic illness… The delivery piece is what we did the last day. And so for me it was very powerful not only making this food, but then going and delivering it to individuals. Like, at one point I walked seven flights of stairs because the elevators were out… And I’ll never forget her face, the look on her face when I handed her this food… Here’s a person who’s not only living with HIV, but, is also living in a very economically depressed situation where she’s stuck in her apartment uhm, because the, the elevator doesn’t work. And so it was really powerful to be able to see the impact on a very human level as well.

Ryan did not share many stories specific to his service experiences besides this one. As evidenced in the language he used in the anecdote, this experience afforded Ryan to
further develop an understanding of the interconnections of a variety of social issues. Although Ryan stated multiple times that his identities contributed to his development of a passion for social justice, service, and leadership, it appears that during his undergraduate years this was largely limited to the campus environment and facilitating student learning and leadership development through on campus initiatives and not in the greater community.

This may have been a result of the impact the on campus environment had on Ryan as a first-generation college student. Despite pursuing experiences across student affairs, Ryan was drawn to leadership and service opportunities as his area of focus specifically because “I saw that impact on me” and because his experiences “transformed my world. Like I went from being like, excited but very, very terrified of college, to really having confidence in being, to feeling like I can persist.” This focus on the campus environment was further explained by Ryan’s statement “I just like college campuses. Education is something that is very powerful for, it’s very important to me.” This passion in part resulted in Ryan being drawn to joining Teach for America in part because “I’m the only person in my family who is still really educated, and so I look at my life and theirs and I can see the power of education.” However, Ryan was not accepted into the program and instead immediately entered graduate school upon graduation. The graduate school to which Ryan eventually enrolled was suggested by a student affairs professional who served as one of his mentors through his work with leadership and service.
Before beginning graduate work, Ryan was able to attend the annual ACPA Convention and participate in Next Generation, a program designed to introduce undergraduates to the field of student affairs and was able to “stay for the rest of the conference. And that was very, very, very, powerful, powerful for me… So, as far as like transition, that was you know, hands down one of the most important uhm, support systems I had.”

Graduate school: “It just, altered it forever.” In speaking of his time in his master’s program, Ryan noted that “we were one of the most diverse cohorts [our program] has had in a long time. And I think because of that we had some very powerful learning from each other.” This statement suggests that Ryan is expressly interested in the role of individuals’ identities in the learning process, which is also evident in his approach to his professional work. Ryan continued his work in leadership and service through his assistantship focused on supervising a student-led volunteer program and expanding leadership program offerings.

Academically for Ryan, “hands down, my most influential professor [taught] a research methods class. And that class changed the trajectory of where I wanted to go.” Through this course, Ryan completed a pilot research project, following the steps of conducting qualitative research from start to finish. For Ryan:

Beforehand I, I had never really thought about going faculty or anything like that. And when I did that interview, those interviews, uhm, and started that process, it was like I was bitten by an inquiry bug. And I realized how inquisitive I am as an
individual, how much I love to write, how much I love to teach. And it just, altered it forever.

Ryan also sought out additional experiences throughout his time in his master’s program. He served as a facilitator for an LGBT awareness program “because I identify as a member of the LGBT community, it’s just something that I find powerful. I was a part of it at [my undergraduate institution] and uhm, I wanted to continue that [in my master’s program],” further highlighting his interest in identity.

In speaking to how his master’s program prepared him for the types of positions he would ultimately end up seeking, Ryan stated, “my program prepared me to be a student affairs practitioner. It did not prepare me to be a leadership educator. I had to seek out that experience through my assistantship and through my internship.” Ryan added that his master’s program:

Did empower me to be able to make those decisions. So indirectly it prepared me because it, it said like, you need to have the skills and you need to seek these things out through either an internship or a practicum and that’s what I did do. But it was, a lot of it was also my own ambition and my own desire that propelled me forward to be as prepared as I am now.

In order to ensure that Ryan had the background that he needed to be a successful leadership educator, he was intentional in seeking additional learning experiences over the summer of his master’s program. He realized “I was very interested in leadership development, and I knew that that was where I wanted to go. But I never, my program didn’t teach theory related to leadership.” As a result, Ryan sought out a summer
internship that allowed him to immerse himself in leadership theory, teach a course related to leadership, and discuss a number of important works with leading scholars in the field. In reflecting on this, Ryan stated “so that was, I think that my internship was one of those pivotal moments in getting me to where I am today.” Ryan’s focus on developing his understanding of leadership theory as opposed to critical and ethical issues as well as best practices of community engagement could be further reflected in Ryan’s belief that “leadership education is… a discipline. Service-learning is not… a discipline, it’s a pedagogy, and a pedagogy to facilitate learning.” This statement further reflects Ryan’s focus on the campus environment, suggesting that he views service-learning and community engagement as a means to educate students rather than affect change within the community. This may also, by extension, reflect Ryan’s focus on social justice education and the slow process of change to influence systems and society.

In addition to his academic and professional experiences, Ryan’s cohort experienced an emotional loss of one of their members:

It really rocked our entire cohort to be honest… I’ll never forget, we were in our foundations class, and we had to do a functional area presentation, and she, [another member of our cohort] and I were working together… and she said she wasn’t feeling very well. And so she excused herself to the bathroom and the next thing I know she had fainted in my bathroom… and we… immediately transported her to the emergency room… she had to leave the cohort and go back through cancer treatment… Our cohort would take road trips there to see her in the hospital and you know, it, it was a really hard experience… And then, she, she
beat it… and she got an apartment and she was thriving again… and the next thing we knew, like her cancer came back a third time. And that was the time that, that it ended up being fatal. And she passed away… I personally was very connected with [her], because she also, she was sort of like my running mate. In that she and I were the two who decided that we wanted to go faculty… So yeah, it was definitely… a part of the program that I think in many ways brought our cohort together.

*Job search: “It was like the beacon of light had shone through my computer.”* In discussing his job search, Ryan stated, “I knew that I only wanted to do leadership and service. So, my focus was not just community engagement. It was leadership, service, social justice; the three of those pieces.” He continued discussing other qualifications to his job search by stating that his “was not regional, like, I don’t care where you send me as long as it’s a metropolitan area, like, I’m not goin’ to the middle of Iowa. But uhm, as long as it’s a metropolitan area I want to do to work that brings me in fulfillment and that’s leadership and service and social justice work.” Ryan knew that “I won’t be happy doing housing or orientation.”

I asked Ryan to share with me how his master’s program prepared him for his job search and the types of positions he hoped to hold after graduation. He stated that the:

Program is so strong… in many ways it over prepares you. …we actually had an experience as a cohort once about how we, many of us are having to like, tone down what we know because we don’t want to come off as you know, arrogant assholes.
Ryan “saw [this] job posted… and it was like the beacon of light had shone through my computer. I was like, this is it. I know that this is it.” Ryan applied for and was ultimately offered the position. He stated that “I didn’t negotiate any salary or anything because I felt like, well this is not really an entry-level position; I have no room to negotiate salary. I am just excited to be here… So, for the most part I was just like, ‘Sign me up. Let’s go!’”

Current position: “What’s surprised me most is how many hats you have to wear.” Ryan has held his current position for just under two years. His primary responsibilities include coordinating a volunteer program that places students in the local community through weekly service trips and large, one-day service initiatives. He also helps to manage the service oriented living-learning program on campus and has taken on additional responsibilities related to program evaluation and assessment that:

Did not come with the job. Uhm, [taking on these responsibilities] was twofold. One, it was because it’s where I want to go. And two, it’s because, just talent… I’m the only other person in the office who enjoys it or has the skills that he does.

In his role coordinating service programs, Ryan shared his orientation towards service that guides his work:

It’s hard because I think that there are people out there who are much more servant leader oriented than I am. I mean I believe in giving back and I feel very connected to service, uhm, but I also more, more so see myself as a little bit more in the social justice and the leadership aspect of like, education.
Ryan sees this orientation and philosophy as being “the platform I came in on. My supervisor, the administration knew that they were hiring me for a specific reason. That I cared about assessment, that I cared about relationships, and that I cared about learning.”

To this end, Ryan has instituted a program that engages students in:

Broader dialogues about the issues impacting the work, so that students aren’t just thinking, uhm, you know I’m serving in a soup kitchen, but why does this soup kitchen exist, what are the greater issues of power and privilege that exist in society?

Ryan shared a number of the challenges surrounding his work during our conversation. As a result of being hired to infuse a more social justice approach to the work of his office, he has tried to institute a culture shift in the organization. Such a purpose, while intimately tied to his passion, was a challenge that Ryan discussed extensively. He shared that at first “my current co-directors at the time fought it tooth and nail. They were like, ‘This is not the way that this organization works. This has never worked this way. This is new, and this is bad.’” Ryan stated that creating change was especially difficult because “the organization… has a very long history.” After working at fostering this change and reflecting on the process, he “had this realization that sometimes it’s not about the change itself, it’s just about change.”

Ryan’s goal of shifting the culture of his organization from “just doing community service to moving not just to service-learning but moving to social justice education and work,” has occasionally been in conflict with how the administration at his institution views his success. Specifically, “I think the administration wants numbers,
they want more alternative breaks, they want more, larger events.” To this end, Ryan believes “that it’s balancing, but I think sometimes there are decisions that you make that will lead to one or the other.” To this end, Ryan has taken steps to ensure that the administration views him as knowledgeable in his area of expertise:

I demonstrate that through assessment and, and you know publication. I think that [makes them say] ‘Ok, we trust you,’ and I think that’s the biggest piece for me, is that I have been able to develop; I have been able to earn the trust of the administration and of my supervisor and colleagues. And I think that because I now have their trust, they are much more willing to allow me to advocate for the student learning side, the student learning side of things.

This statement again, shows Ryan’s focus on community engagement as a pedagogy and not necessarily a means for promoting change in the local community.

Ryan’s goal was to teach students “that this is about learning about the issues, becoming aware of your role in [the issues], and then taking action to create a more equitable system.” Ryan’s language here further highlights his social justice approach to his work through his use of the word system to highlight the purpose and results of his work. Through this approach, Ryan likely does not expect to see tangible results of students’ service in the local community, and instead hopes to develop students’ understanding in an effort to create a more critical set of individuals. Although Ryan stated multiple times throughout the interviews that he views himself as being highly relational, he stated that “learning the culture of non-profit agencies and how you work with non-profits and what you’re relationship means to them versus what it means to
you.” This statement suggests that the community agencies with which Ryan worked saw a purpose in his efforts different than educating students about social justice.

In an effort to both make his job more manageable as well as contribute to the learning of his students, Ryan is “creating infrastructure and consistency around the things that I don’t like.” Ryan also shared that his job is high stress in the number of roles he must fill:

I think what’s surprised me most is how many hats you have to wear. So I’m an event planner, I’m a supervisor of 25. I’m a community builder, I, I do assessment and research on the go. I manage a fleet of four vans. I, you know, am on the phone with our legal counsel often creating like, liability forms and talking about the risk associated with our alternative breaks. I’m a counselor. You know, just all of the different roles, within working in service-learning is what really surprised me.

As with previous statements, this litany of responsibilities highlights Ryan’s focus on the campus environment and not his intermediary role of maintaining connections between community agencies and the institution. Additionally, Ryan has responded to a number of challenges and has worked to better unify community engagement work across departments. He shared that:

We’re currently doing some work to better align community engagement work, because at [the institution] there are so many people who do service, and we all do it differently, and to the community we are all [the institution]. But to, what they don’t realize is that we are all very different pieces of the community, of [the
institution], and so, they get really frustrated and they are all like, ‘Why can’t you all get your shit together?’

Further Ryan shared that:

What [the institution doesn’t] realize is that in many ways, the work of community engagement is important from the educational standard, but it’s also incredibly important from the community relations standard. Because what you are doing is you’re bridging town-gown relationships and you are trying to situate the university in a positive context for community partners.

In order to address these challenges, Ryan shared that processes are getting implemented “so when we show up all of our volunteers have similar training so we are engaging with the same level of respect, that we are doing the same kinds of assessment and all sorts of things like that.”

This is one of the few statements Ryan made regarding the impact of students at their service sites and how they interact with community members. Although he did not discuss these challenges extensively, Ryan may have spent considerable time reflecting on these issues and preparing students to engage in the community in a respectful manner. Still, his efforts to develop processes and a unified approach to engaging with the community seems to reflect more of an interest in promoting a positive institutional image to the local community.

Future goals: “My place is in the faculty.” Ryan shared that he recently applied to a Ph.D. program, stating: “I care most about student learning and, and development. And, although there are pieces of that nested in my current position of being a
practitioner, I know that… my place is in the faculty.” Ryan’s decision to pursue professional work before entering a doctoral program to prepare for the faculty role was intentional:

The reality is that folks are pretty, like, you need to have practical experience before you become a faculty member. And, I, they’re right. And I think I thought about that I wanted to go faculty, but I never worked professionally full time and I needed to have this experience.

This statement indicates that although Ryan may “leave” the field as a practitioner, this was planned from before he began his full-time work. Ryan also discussed challenges related to his position that made it difficult to see himself persisting in the functional area for an extended period of time if he were to stay on the practitioner track. In addition to the low pay of community engagement professionals, Ryan shared that “I think the event planning is what would lead to burnout for me. I think community engagement work is high stress. … [But] once you get to a rhythm it would be fine.” Specifically he shared his belief that, in comparison to other events that may take place on campus:

It’s one thing to take 1,500 people and put them in a field, and orchestrate a concert. There’s a lot of complexity that comes with security and the… performers and stuff like that. It’s another thing to bring 1,500 people to a field, have like a kick off and lunch ceremony, then orchestrate the simultaneous dispatching of those 1,500 people to 40 different projects across the city, ensure that no one dies, you know, gets hurt, anything like that. They are all doing projects at the same time, and they all come back together at the same time. I’m
like, there’s just a level of complexity in service-learning events like that that is just, it is unrivaled. It is fascinating.

**Summary.** For Ryan, his identity as a first-generation college student was highly influential in fostering his desire to pursue student affairs. Many of his undergraduate experiences were those which focused on students transitioning to higher education, fostering experiences which developed other students leadership skills and learning from the community, and providing service to the university which had provided Ryan a number of transformational experiences. As an undergraduate student, Ryan was more involved and held more leadership positions than the other participants. His decision to focus on service and leadership programming as a professional is reflective of those programs that were most influential in developing his confidence, leadership skills, and afforded him opportunities to engage other students in educational conversations around poverty and social justice issues.

Ryan’s passion around social justice education and student learning are connected to both pursuing community engagement and faculty positions. Ryan expressed that he was hired specifically to bring about a culture change in the office, moving it from a community service to a social justice focus. More than the other participants, he has a clear idea of his future goals and was able to continue the intentionality and ambition that all participants had in their graduate programs in his first professional position.

His desire to leave the functional area and begin doctoral work in preparation to enter the faculty is not necessarily because of a specific aspect of his position that has caused him to pursue other options. Ryan did not discuss factors in his current position
that would have prompted him to consider other functional areas other than event planning, pay, and the necessity of juggling a number of different roles. Nor did Ryan reference a lack of interest in the changes in job responsibilities that may occur if he continued to advance as a practitioner. Although Ryan does not want to persist in community engagement as his functional area, this is primarily because he is drawn to another role within student affairs.

Themes Underlying the Narratives

These four narratives outline the journey of new student affairs professionals, during the retelling of which they were asked to reflect on those moments and experiences that were most influential in leading them to their present positions. Through sharing their stories, these individuals were able to reflect on where they have been, where they hope to move in the future, and the successes and challenges they have experienced along the way. Each journey is the result of intentional and determined choices that reflect the passions of these professionals.

Developed using the content-categorical method of analysis (Leiblich, Tuval-Machlach, & Zilber, 1998) common in narrative research, the themes were generated through reading and rereading transcripts to identify common meaningful experiences expressed by the participants. In determining this, I considered the presentation of different experiences, the amount of detail shared regarding these experiences, as well as the language they used suggesting the importance of each experience as related to the research questions.
For example, although three participants pursued international experiences during their graduate programs, Rochelle did not mention this during her interviews; rather through reviewing her resume I noted she had this experience. Further, the information Bethany shared in reference to her experience abroad did not relate to the research questions and was limited in detail. As a result, I did not include this information in their narratives, nor is it reflected in the themes generated.

As another example, in determining the Goal Orientation of the participants, I focused on those experiences which participants pursued related to advancing their understanding of or practical experience in the field or functional area. This included consideration of not only the experiences which participants sought out and the number of times they referenced the position they desired to hold, but also what they stated they had been willing to give up in the process of attaining these goals (e.g., Rochelle ultimately prioritizing her job search over her boyfriend’s search).

Similarly, Language and Service Orientation of Undergraduate Programs, Professional Philosophy, and Uncertain Future and Challenges Influencing Persistence involved recognizing the repetitive nature in which participants made reference to specific aspects associated within these themes. For example, in determining the Language and Service Orientation of Undergraduate Programs, I tracked the different ways in which participants discussed the activities associated with their undergraduate experiences as well as the outcomes they expect from their current work. Specifically, I noted the differences in language occurrence among words such as apply.
[knowledge/skills], benefit, contribute, change, [find] fulfillment, help, make better, save, and serve, as well as community, individuals, society, and systems.

In using this analytical approach, I was able to sort the experiences and themes expressed by the participants into categories, reflected below in Identity, Language and Service Orientation of Undergraduate Programs, Transition from Internal to External Motivations, Goal Orientation, The Job Search, Professional Philosophy, and Uncertain Future and Challenges Influencing Persistence. Within each theme the differences between participants are also noted, since although the participants may have had common experiences, they often manifested differently in each professional’s journey. The themes are presented in chronological order as they occurred throughout the participants’ lives.

Identity

The information the participants shared indicates a diverse set of experiences prior to entering college. Two of the participants, Ryan and Rochelle, were first generation college students and both attributed this aspect of their identity as being influential to their decision to pursue student affairs. Bethany, who struggled with a learning disability as a child, and Nora grew up in fairly privileged families and their mothers worked on college campuses; both mentioned that the financial security of their families allowed them to participate only in activities in college that they chose.

Those participants from more ethnically and financially privileged backgrounds discussed at greater length the impact of their work on the community than the participants who identified as first-generation and from traditionally underrepresented
backgrounds. This may be in part a result of the increased time commitment that these participants were able to make to their community engagement involvement as a result of their financial security. Spending more time in the community and intellectually engaging with these issues may have afforded them the opportunity to grapple with these issues. However, another interpretation could be that the communities with which many of their programs work are in some ways geographic, ethnic, and/or socioeconomic “others” to the professionals with more privileged backgrounds. Their focus on how their work influences the community may stem from their inability to fully empathize with the community. As a result, they maybe have spent additional time considering the perspective of the community and unpacking their own socialization to service.

Language and Service Orientation of Undergraduate Programs

It is important to note that through their narratives, participants’ language surrounding their involvement conveyed an orientation towards service with which the student affairs professionals at their undergraduate institution appear to have approached their work, and which the participants largely subsequently adopted. Specifically, participants’ language differed in terms of two important aspects: individuals and community as opposed to systems, and contribution versus change. Although all participants used most of these words, they each had a dominant approach that they referenced. This approach was used to explain both participants’ undergraduate experiences that made this involvement meaningful and their approach to their current work.
Rochelle in particular, and less frequently Nora, described the perceived impact of the service programs they coordinate on individuals, or groups of individuals that make up communities or society. Often, in discussing their work in this way would reference a single social issue at a time, such as homelessness or education, and not the intersecting social identities of those served, themselves, or students. The interconnections were in some cases referenced elsewhere during the interviews, although their discussion was limited. Other participants described how their engagement with specific social issues or individuals served as a learning experience which drew their attention to the interconnections between social issues and the importance of identity.

Further, some participants referred to a desire to “contribute” to society or their community, suggesting a belief in the adaptability of the present systems. In contrast, other participants reflected on their undergraduate experience as a way for them to learn about the interconnections between social issues and identity so as to later work to change or alter systems of power and oppression. These participants did not necessarily state that they viewed their undergraduate involvement at the time in this way. For example, this did not occur to Bethany until she was interviewing for a full-time position. Still, these participants used language that more fully represented the interconnecting nature of the social issues with which they engaged.

As mentioned, participants more concerned with providing direct service rarely discussed how the issues they worked with interconnected with social identities. As a result, from the conversations I had with these participants, there seems to be either an unstated assumption regarding the importance of, or a lack of awareness in, how identity
and social constructs influence community engagement in higher education. This may suggest that these individuals are invested in their work because of a desire to engage students in direct service benefitting communities at the individual level. As a result, this orientation to their work indicates the future challenges these professionals may face regarding burnout and their desire to persist in the face of limited community change.

Despite some participants’ limited statements reflecting an understanding of identity, most participants stated that those experiences that fostered personal connections to the “other” seemed to be the most meaningful. The stories the participants shared around these relationships suggest that some aspect was profoundly moving or inspiring to the participants on their path to continuing their involvement in and development of personal passion around service.

Transition from External to Internal Motivations

The narratives of the professionals included in this study suggested that, for most participants, during their undergraduate years they transitioned from relying on external factors and others in influential positions to developing internal motivations for pursuing service and leadership opportunities. Most participants expressed that the involvement of their peers, predominately those they knew through their residential community, was most influential in prompting their involvement in service. After their initial participation, they each developed different reasons for pursuing leadership opportunities or further involvement, in accordance with their own goals and interests. This is true with the exception of Nora, whose continued involvement and leadership was prompted by a student affairs professional. Through their increased involvement, commitment to
leadership opportunities, and continued relationship development with mentors, the participants eventually came to a realization that pursuing community engagement positions would be in accordance with their own values and desired sense of purpose. Despite a movement towards an internally defined purpose for participating in service and community engagement, participants again relied on the advice of mentors and influential others in recognizing their ability to pursue student affairs as a profession and schools where they could pursue graduate work.

**Goal Orientation: Seeking Additional Experiences**

The participants each entered their graduate programs with an internally defined understanding of the type of professional position they would pursue after graduation. Most participants began their graduate programs holding an assistantship in the functional area they intended to pursue, although Nora wanted to enter student activities generally and the specificity of coordinating volunteer programs seemed limiting for her. Despite the focused professional experience offered through their assistantships, each participant pursued additional experiences that would prepare them to enter these positions upon graduation. Their ability to strategically determine the opportunities that would be most beneficial to their professional development indicates their commitment to the functional area.

This goal seeking behavior of participants seems to have been largely limited to acquiring practical experiences. Only Bethany and Ryan mentioned engaging in activities that developed their intellectual understanding of research and best practices related to the functional area. Further, Ryan’s experiences centered on developing his
understanding of leadership theory, not of best practices or research related to community engagement. This could be a contributing factor to the lack of apparent unity amongst participants’ explanations of their roles, philosophy towards service, and anticipated student outcomes.

The Job Search: Focused Concentration, Diverse Positions, Specific Geography

The comments made by participants suggest that despite their stated desire to foster change in communities through community engagement, the geographic location must also be an appropriate place for these professionals to call home. The environment, staff, and opportunities available determined a large portion of the participants’ job search criteria; even when faced with opportunities to become involved in locations with less understanding of social justice issues as a region, participants did not see this as an opportunity to effect change. Rather, they saw these communities as either undesirable to live or lacking opportunities for them to engage in community service work. These statements suggest that although not all participants expressly stated the importance of ensuring a positive lived experience outside of work as a way to remain committed, most of them felt that living in a rural community would be too challenging personally.

Education and Student Learning: Professional Philosophy

Rochelle’s comments that framed the urban nature of her job search suggest that although she is aware that there are social issues in rural areas, her professional approach to service appears to operate from a prioritization of direct, hands on service that addresses the visible social issues common in urban areas. All participants conveyed that by engaging students in direct service, they are better able to develop an understanding of
social issues and referred extensively to the student learning that follows. For the majority of participants, this was the purpose behind their work and their philosophy on community engagement generally. Most participants stated that they saw themselves first and foremost as educators, using service to teach the content, messages, and skills necessary to success in either creating positive social change or contributing to society. Bethany was the only participant of these three who expressed internal struggle over the power imbalances inherent in community engagement work.

*Uncertain Future and Challenges Influencing Persistence*

The focused nature of each participant’s professional development and goals from their application to graduate school is juxtaposed by their general lack of a path for their future. With the exception of Ryan, who is taking intentional steps towards becoming a student affairs faculty member, Nora, Rochelle, and Bethany did not have goals that were as clearly defined.

Perhaps because the participants were drawn to the functional area based on prior experiences as undergraduate students and mostly prepared for their positions by seeking additional practical experiences, they have not had the opportunity to reflect on the functional area as a whole and its direction. Without a larger view of the functional area or the role of the community engagement movement in the higher education system, they are unable to identify another way in which they can be involved in the field as they advance their career. Those participants who expressed that they use community engagement as a means to educate around social justice seemed to be more able to
identify potential future career paths that continue to advance this mission, which may or may not include aspects of connecting students directly to the local community.

Nora, Bethany, and Rochelle all spoke with hesitation, uncertainty, and curiosity for what the future holds. Despite their uncertainty about the future, each participant conveyed a sense of confidence in her ability to continue on their path, engaging in work that they find both professionally meaningful and personally fulfilling. It is interesting to revisit that each professional interviewed has a male supervisor, which may shed light on both the future career paths taken by women in student affairs as well as potential challenges that may influence persistence.

Despite their varied goals for the future, all participants identified issues that they could foresee influencing the decision to persist in the functional area. These included challenges perceived in working with faculty, as well as low pay and the stress of continual event planning. Both Ryan and Nora’s discussion of issues related to persistence were limited as they viewed their current position as a stepping-stone on to a different aspect of student affairs.

Rochelle shared factors influencing her personal satisfaction with her position, which seem to stem from her professional orientation towards service and how closely her career is tied to her identity. This is in contrast to the other participants in this study who are equally committed to the functional area yet seemed to be able to detach emotionally from the urgency of their work, were less focused on creating change, or did not believe that immediate change could be created through their work. In the words of
Bethany, “we’re on a journey, there’s like, not an end point, we’re not going to get to this place where everything is perfect.”

These differing statements suggest that there was a difference in how participants approached their work; some focused on educating students about the root causes of the social issues they were addressing while others focused on contributing to the immediate alleviation of social issues within a specific geographic area as a means of facilitating students’ leadership development. Through an approach focused on education regarding the root causes, the interconnections of the issues and systems of power are highlighted. By extension, participants with this orientation recognized the slow speed of societal change and how difficult it is to affect change in one geographic or topical area. The narratives of the participants suggest that by approaching community engagement work from an understanding of the slow rate of change is in some ways stress relieving, which may in turn influence persistence in these roles.

Further, I was struck by Nora’s personal challenge to in-authentically portray passion and Rochelle’s disagreement with her former supervisor over the purpose of community engagement work. Both of these participants have been faced with a challenge in the philosophical approach to the functional area or the office in which they were employed. It is unclear how these issues of congruence would have influenced Rochelle’s persistence had they been present in her current position. For Nora however, the issue of in-authentically portraying passion appears to be closely linked with her desire to move into a different functional area.
Those participants who worked professionally to coordinate service opportunities before pursuing their graduate work expressed that they experience some level of cognitive dissonance around service. Bethany and Nora both shared that in different ways, they felt that engaging others in service often either takes advantage of the community and those in vulnerable situations or does not accomplish much in terms of meeting the needs of the community. This suggests that perhaps by increasing the number of years professionals are involved in promoting community engagement, they begin to question the purpose and outcomes of their work. For Nora, this is related to the knowledge that her past service experiences did not result in any change over the years and is at least partially tied to her lack of passion regarding community engagement. It is unclear what has prompted Bethany to begin to struggle with these issues and it remains to be seen how or if this dissonance will influence her persistence.

Connecting the Themes: How Prior Experiences Influence Professional Practice

Through examining the common experiences of these four professionals, patterns begin to emerge from the narratives, suggesting a common set of experiences that may lead individuals to community engagement positions in higher education. Through identifying a potential path that these participants have in common, the implications for practice and future research outlined in the following chapter are more clearly identified.

It is clear that the different backgrounds of these participants influenced how each identified different opportunities early in their college experience that placed them on a trajectory of student involvement from their first few weeks on campus. Importantly, for almost all participants their initial engagement on campus was specifically related to
community service. The patterns of involvement and participants recounting of their development of community engagement as a passion area suggests that the participants were first drawn to service and community engagement; only after extensive involvement and building their leadership capacity in the functional area did they consider entering student affairs as a potential career.

By listening to which aspects of their involvement in community engagement were most influential to them and comparing this to how they describe their current approach to their work, the connections between the philosophy of their undergraduate advisors who coordinated service programs towards service and participants’ current professional approach becomes apparent. Specifically, some participants shared that their undergraduate involvement was largely based in social justice and used similar or more detailed language to describe their current approach to their work.

In contrast, participants who detailed their undergraduate involvement by sharing the specific activities in which they engaged described their current work using language that conveyed a prioritization of providing direct service and leadership opportunities for students. Through these experiences, it was expressed that students are able to learn formal leadership skills and develop confidence in their own ideas and abilities. This pattern suggests that the participants’ undergraduate experiences in service were more formative to their conceptualization of how service programs should be structured and what skills or values should be fostered in students through community engagement programs than their graduate experiences.
As alluded to above, this might also be related to issues that may impact persistence and burnout amongst the participants in this study. Those who approach their work with the intent of creating long-term, sustainable change through educating students around social justice did not convey their sense of stress as intertwined with their personal life or sense of professional competency as the other participants did. In contrast, the participants who did convey heightened levels of stress and an increased emotional attachment to their work expressed through their stories a larger focus on individual student learning and development than participants who were more focused on creating positive social change. This is not to say that those professionals who operated more from a social justice perspective are not focused on individual students or that those focused on individual students and specific skill development are not focused on creating sustainable change. All participants in this study were interested in some way in contributing to or changing society and student learning, yet the way they each expressed these different but interrelated commitments was a unique reflection of their background and prior experiences.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the data collected through a series of three interviews with four participants. I shared the individual stories of the four participants and outlined general themes and commonalities that emerged from the individual participants’ stories. Through sharing the participants’ professional journeys and considerations of their future, I drew attention to the differences between participants’ philosophy towards service as well as the commonalities throughout their
prior lived experiences. I then analyzed the participants’ journeys across themes and highlighted the interconnections and the importance of undergraduate involvement.

The professionals involved in this study discussed how their own privileges and prior experiences have influenced their dedication and passion to the field. They were open in sharing some of the challenging experiences they have faced and were willing to admit that they did not have answers to some of the questions I posed to them. Participants expressed their intentionality in entering the functional area or, in the case of Nora, the influence of her prior experiences resulting in positions focused on community engagement. They also recounted the aspects of their positions that propel them to continue engaging students in service as well as those factors that make it difficult to see themselves continuing to advance in this aspect of the field. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings related to the research questions more in depth and in relation to the relevant literature, the implications for student affairs and future research, as well as the limitations of the study.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Participants in this study shared stories and emotions with me regarding their experiences that have led them down the path of pursuing community engagement positions within higher education. They conveyed the meaningful experiences of their undergraduate education, the prior experiences that led them to seek out these experiences early in their undergraduate career, and discussed points along their journey towards conceptualizing student affairs as a profession. They each also shared moments of vulnerability and honesty in discussing the challenges they have faced along the way. Participants’ backgrounds and identities interacted with and influenced the depth of their involvement, number of leadership roles, and development of mentoring relationships, which in turn led them to consider entering the field of student affairs. In this chapter, I summarize the findings in relation to the research questions, connect the findings to relevant literature, and provide implications for practice and avenues for future research. Finally, I present the limitations of the study.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

The purpose of this constructivist narrative study was to explore the prior experiences of new student affairs professionals who hold positions focused in community engagement and their intentions to persist in the functional area. The research questions that guided this study were:
1) What are the prior life experiences of new student affairs professionals that have influenced their decision to hold a position focused on engaging students with the local community through co-curricular volunteerism, community service, or service-learning?

2) What factors influence individuals’ desire to leave or persist in these positions?

In the following sections, I summarize these findings in relation to the research questions that guided the study. Following, I discuss the findings in relation to relevant literature.

**What are the Prior Life Experiences?**

The participants in this study were involved in a number of similar experiences before accepting their first professional position. All participants aspired at some point in their life to teach at the elementary or high school level, suggesting that all had an interest in being educators and imparting knowledge. Ryan, Rochelle, and Bethany attended the flagship, state public institution in their home state for their undergraduate education, and each of them was involved in a living-learning program on campus. All of the participants were intimately involved with service programming as an undergraduate student and all held leadership positions that afforded them the opportunity to coordinate these types of initiatives for other students. With the exception of Bethany, the participants were also employed through various student affairs offices as undergraduates, not necessarily affiliated with community engagement programming. Further, all participants had a mentor during their undergraduate or post-baccalaureate years which prompted their consideration of student affairs as a professional career path and suggested consideration of specific graduate programs. These experiences may have
both ensured that as students, the participants developed a passion for service and community engagement work while also contributing to their understanding and awareness of student affairs as a career path.

At different points in their life, both Rochelle and Ryan lost individuals with whom they had developed relationships. For Rochelle, this was a strong motivator in becoming further involved in community service programs while in high school. For Ryan, the loss of a cohort member he considered his “running mate” in pursuing faculty positions may have reinforced his commitment to pursuing this path. Participants shared anecdotes suggesting that throughout their undergraduate engagement, they moved from external to internally defined motivations for their involvement. Once relying on internal values and motivations for engaging in service, participants’ leadership opportunities appear to have contributed to a sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to coordinate community engagement programs professionally.

Nora and Bethany pursued professional positions after their undergraduate education for different reasons, but both held positions focused on service and engaging others in the local community. These experiences reinforced Bethany’s eventual decision to enter student affairs and pursue community engagement as a functional area. In contrast, Nora found that her prior experiences with volunteer programs has led her to struggle with service opportunities that she believes make a minimal difference in the community, especially given her limited passion regarding any specific social issue. Despite these beliefs, Nora points to her prior experiences with service as a primary factor in securing funding to pursue graduate education and she has continued to have the
opportunity to further engage students in their local community, despite Nora’s desire to hold a position focused on student activities more generally.

While in graduate school, all participants held assistantships that focused on community service or service-learning. They each pursued additional experiences they believed would prepare them to begin their job search or in their next professional position, either through research or internships. These experiences, such as holding an internship to learn leadership theory or conducting original leadership on service-learning best practices, provided the opportunity to further develop the practical skills they believed to be necessary when pursuing their desired position.

*What Factors Influence the Desire to Leave or Persist?*

The individual narratives of each participant contribute to the differing reasons stated or alluded to as to why each participant may persist or advance out of student affairs community engagement positions. The intentionality with which most participants entered the functional area is reflected in their desire to continue community engagement work within higher education, although for some participants this looks different than others. Rochelle hopes to continue working directly with students, while Bethany would welcome the opportunity to engage faculty or develop the capacity of larger administrative structures to advance the best practices of service-learning. Ryan and Nora are both intending to leave the functional area within the next few years; Ryan has applied to doctoral programs to prepare to enter the faculty, although he hopes to continue some aspect of community engagement work throughout his career. Nora never
desired to hold a student affairs position focused on community engagement and hopes to move to a more general student activities position in the next few years.

Despite these differences in intention and future goals, participants identified struggles they face in their positions that may make it difficult for them to continue to do the work long term. Participants discussed the stress level of their jobs. Although these challenges spanned a variety of aspects, all participants recognized the administrations’ ambivalence or the challenge of balancing the pursuit of student learning with a push for increased participation numbers from Vice Presidents of Student Life and fiscal officers. Nora discussed not wanting to feel like she was “faking” her passion and interest in her position, which she feels she is currently doing as a result her lack of passion around any particular social issue. Bethany also talked about the internal struggle of balancing her feelings of using the communities where her students serve to challenge stereotypes so that her students can learn, in essence using the communities and those in vulnerable situations to advance student learning around social justice.

As a result, there seem to be a variety of factors related to persistence, for the new professionals in this study. Issues surrounding stress, emotional burnout, faculty involvement, authenticity, pay, logistical details, and community partnerships were mentioned as factors that do or have the potential to influence participants’ future decisions.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Relevant Literature

As mentioned in Chapter Four, the participants in this study appeared to have first become deeply involved in service programming during their high school or
undergraduate years. As a result of the meaningful experiences most participants had as undergraduates engaging in service, they pursued (or were asked to pursue) leadership positions that afforded them both professional skills as well as insight into the profession of student affairs. In this section I will relate the career decision-making literature to the participants’ paths to the profession. Through this, I will draw connections between career decision-making literature, participants’ experiences, and research on these experiences (i.e., living-learning programs, student affairs student employment, service, and leadership). Following this I will discuss the literature on career satisfaction and the factors cited by participants as influencing their intention to persist in the functional area.

*Paths to the Profession*

The journeys shared by the participants in this study lend support to Brown’s (2004) model of post college decision-making and social cognitive career theory. Below, I outline how the narratives shared by participants are reflective of and challenge Brown’s model, applying the model to the participants’ decision to pursue the community engagement as a profession, and not necessarily a singular position post-college. Reflecting the narratives of the participants, this section almost exclusively focuses on the undergraduate experiences of the participants, as they had all effectively decided on entering the functional area either at the conclusion of the undergraduate education or indicated that their later desire to enter the profession stemmed from their undergraduate involvement. In integrating the available literature with participants’ prior experiences, I support and challenge the applicability of Brown’s (2004) model to the career decision-making process.
The model posits that students’ orientation to learning influences their determination of new experiences in college and interactions with others, all of which in turn are considered in an ongoing process of determining one’s post-college plans (Brown, 2004). In the stories shared by participants, they each referenced experiences prior to college that influenced their decision to become involved in service and leadership programs once they began their undergraduate education. These pre-collegiate experiences primarily included a previous engagement in service, the importance of which has been suggested (Cruce & Moore, 2012; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Although participants did not offer a deep interpretation or explanation of their pre-college involvement in service, these and other prior experiences seem to have influenced their desire to become engaged and their choice of activities upon entering college.

Co-curricular experiences. Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement posits that student collegiate learning is largely influenced by the amount of time and psychological energy students dedicate to various experiences on campus. The theory affords students the agency to determine the activities and the degree of their involvement. As seen in the individual narratives, participants all dedicated a large amount of time and energy in service and leadership experiences as an undergraduate student. Brown (2004) found that involvement in campus activities such as courses, on-and off-campus internships, as well as co-curricular activities influenced students’ post-college decisions. With the exception of Bethany, undergraduate coursework did not appear to have a strong influence on these participants, two of which noted that they chose their major based on intellectual interests and never intended to pursue a career in
the field. Much more influential on the participants in this study were the co-curricular activities in which they were involved.

The co-curricular experiences participants recounted as influential to their undergraduate involvement largely began during the participants’ first year as an undergraduate student, the importance of which is supported by previous research (Berger & Milem, 1999) that indicates the importance of first year engagement on undergraduate retention. Ryan, Rochelle, and Bethany were each involved in a living-learning community during their first year on campus, which Bethany and Rochelle both credit with fostering their collegiate engagement in service. Prior research indicates participation in living-learning programs is linked to an increased likelihood that students will be involved on campus (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003) and volunteer during their first year (Crucce & Moore, 2012).

Inkelas and Weisman (2003) used quantitative methods to compare students involved in three different types of living-learning programs as well as a control group and determined that non-participants are less involved in activities “designed to be critical aspects of the living-learning experience” (p. 358). Cruce and Moore (2012) also used quantitative methods to determine those demographic, pre-college, and early-college experiences that help to predict undergraduate engagement in service programming. Factors found to be influential were students’ gender, previous engagement in service, country of citizenship, and parents level of education.

For Bethany and Rochelle, their simple participation in a living-learning program was not enough to foster involvement in service, rather the content and focus of the
living-learning program played a large role in guiding them to continue to engage in service experiences. Bethany and Rochelle’s prior experiences with service influenced their decision to become engaged in these communities. For Rochelle, being with her high school friends was a primary motivator for engaging in service, similar to findings in prior research (Jones & Hill, 2003). Bethany specifically mentioned her parents and her religious upbringings that influenced her involvement in service before college, which also supports the findings of Jones and Hill (2003). However, Bethany conveyed that her prior experiences with service were not based in the church or synagogue as the participants in Jones and Hill (2003) reported, rather her experiences were rooted in the general tenets of her faith.

It appears from the stories of the participants that their early collegiate involvement prompted experiences that fostered a movement from external to internal motivations to participate in service experiences. Rochelle conveyed a sense that finding supportive others and being immersed in an environment that introduced her to the different ways in which she could get involved in the community surrounding campus was enough to ensure her continued participation, while Ryan shared that the transformational experiences he had prompted him to explore further ways to become involved in service and leadership.

In line with the language used by participants, prior research suggests that service-learning can be a transformational experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kiely, 2004; Pompa, 2002). Some of this research indicates the long lasting influences of this participation, evidenced in career and other lifestyle changes that have been maintained.
over time (Jones & Abes, 2004; Kiely, 2004). Eyler and Giles’ (1999) seminal work on the learning that results from engaging in service-learning programs outlines a number of the affective and cognitive learning outcomes associated. Pompa (2002) reviewed qualitative reflections collected from students involved in an academic course held in an adult prison and Kiely (2004) conducted a longitudinal case study of students who participated in an international service-learning program with an explicitly social justice orientation.

Other participants did not describe their experience as transformational. Rather, they seemed to convey that their increasing involvement seemed like the next logical step, suggesting that they either found their involvement in service to be a reaffirmation of previously held beliefs or were not faced with experiences or opportunities to deeply reflect on their involvement that could then foster transformational learning. The implications of how this may influence their professional practice are unclear. Still, given the previous experiences of participants engaging in service prior to college, it is possible that these experiences were those that provided the context for transformational learning.

Ryan, Bethany, and Nora cited the personal connections they were able to make with members of the community that they served as being one of the more meaningful experiences of the undergraduate experiences. Prior research has suggested that when students are afforded opportunities to develop relationships with those they are serving, the experiences result in a variety of different learning outcomes, including developing a deeper understanding of diversity (Jones & Hill, 2001), and provides opportunities for
students to challenge their previous assumptions (King, 2004). Further research indicates that face-to-face interactions also impact students’ knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about social issues (Jones & Abes, 2003). Primarily, the participants in this study reflected on the feelings and emotions these experiences elicited, rather than the learning that resulted. This may suggest that, at least for these participants, the cognitive development that may result from service programs providing direct contact with the clients of community partners may, over time, lose salience. Another interpretation could be that after a number of years, the personal relationships developed by participants through their service remained distinct experiences, while the learning became embedded in the lives of the participants.

Although some participants were involved in activities outside of community engagement, in general the depth of participants’ involvement primarily occurred at the intersections of service and leadership. Through a variety of experiences that can be classified in these two domains, participants demonstrated a commitment to exploring issues of community engagement and deepening their understanding of using experiential pedagogies to advance student understanding. The findings from this study suggest that not only student learning results from physical and psychological engagement with co-curricular experiences (Astin, 1984); students can also develop career paths and professional goals associated with their out-of-classroom experiences, a finding supported by Haley and Jaeger’s (2012) exploration of women higher education faculty members paths to their position. Still, the women in Haley and Jaeger’s study did not
have the passion and limited focus of the professionals in the present study and referred to general leadership opportunities.

*Mentoring relationships.* Through participants’ leadership roles and paid student affairs positions, they were afforded routine opportunities to observe current student affairs professionals in their career. Through these positions it appears they were able to see student affairs practitioners in a different context, not just as advisors but also as professionals. The influence of watching these professionals is suggested in social cognitive career theory to be a source of influence in developing career self-efficacy (Hackett & Betz, 1981). Additionally, student affairs student employment has been found to be one of the most useful sources of information regarding the profession (Taub & McEwen, 2006), supported by participants statements that they gained a broader understanding of the field by interacting with professionals in different functional areas.

The findings from this study indicate that student affairs student employment may be a useful source of information for aspiring student affairs professionals as a result of developing a broader or deeper understanding of the profession and the responsibilities of those in the field. Both Rochelle and Ryan held positions outside of community engagement, which may have helped them to more quickly identify student affairs as a field that encompasses a variety of functional areas. Further, student employment in student affairs departments has been linked to students being better able to clarify their career goals (Athas, Kennedy-Phillips, & Oaks, under review). For Rochelle and Ryan, who held student positions in functional areas unassociated with community engagement
and were the two participants to enter graduate school immediately upon graduation, it appears that this employment solidified their interest in pursuing the profession.

Through their undergraduate employment and leadership experiences in student affairs, Nora, Rochelle, and Ryan developed mentoring relationships with student affairs professionals. They credited these individuals with introducing them to the field as a potential profession and specific graduate programs to which they should submit applications. Mentors have been suggested to be important sources of information in prior studies of career decision-making (Amudson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010; Brown, 2004), especially for women (Allen & Taylor, 2006). The importance of mentorship and encouragement by others to consider the profession is also documented in the literature around the decision to pursue student affairs as a profession (Taub & McEwen, 2006) and the importance of encouragement in developing career self-efficacy is posited in social cognitive career theory (Hackett & Betz, 1981).

Further, Campbell, Smith, Dugan, and Komives (2012) examined the findings of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), a national instrument of college student leadership development as they related to student mentoring relationships. They found that in comparison to mentorship from a faculty member, student affairs mentoring relationships were positively related to developing socially responsible leadership. Participants in the present study stated a desire to foster the values associated with socially responsible leadership that they had previously expressed they primarily developed as an undergraduate student. For example, Bethany spoke at length about her growth in understanding issues of identity (consciousness of self), and her current focus
on fostering this understanding in her students. Similarly, Rochelle explained her prior experiences and current focus on developing students’ integration of citizenship into their future careers. This seems to suggest support for the findings of Campbell et al. (2012) and other quantitative studies using the MSL to explore connections between undergraduate involvement experiences, such as participating in service and holding leadership roles and the development of competency if the social change model values (Dugan, 2006; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Haber & Komives, 2009).

However, the qualitative nature of the present study appears to further these results by suggesting that student affairs mentorship not only develops students’ appreciation of values associated with socially responsible leadership. This mentorship may also have a lasting influence in how future student affairs professionals approach their work, and further suggests that some values associated with socially responsible leadership may resonate more or less strongly with some individuals.

**Leadership experiences.** For most participants, these mentoring relationships were developed through the leadership experiences held by the participants in college. Much of the literature regarding student leadership experiences relies on the social change model of leadership development and the seven values that the model postulates are important to develop in individuals (e.g. Dugan & Komives, 2007; Dugan & Komives, 2010). Many of these values (i.e., consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, citizenship, and change) can be considered to be important for student affairs professionals to hold, reflected in the
professional competency areas developed by ACPA and NASPA (2010). These competencies make reference to student affairs professionals' ability to identify their “personal beliefs and commitments” (p. 26; consciousness of self) and “develop appropriate alliances with others” (p. 19; collaboration), among others.

The decision to pursue various leadership positions points to the level of interest that participants had developed around community engagement and leadership. Social cognitive career theory posits that individuals are most likely to enter professions that reflect their primary interest areas (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Other research also suggests that individuals generally choose professions that align with their personal values (Amundson, et al., 2010). The journeys shared by the participants seem to lend support to this concept and deepen Taub and McEwen’s (2006) finding that student affairs professionals are drawn to the field for the opportunity to work on a college campus. The stories of these new student affairs professionals expand these findings as some participants recognized that although there are careers that accurately reflect their interests and values, pursuing these careers would not have enabled them to meet the goals they hoped to achieve in their professional work. Specifically, participants noted the unique context of higher education afforded them the opportunity to contribute to an effort to educate individuals regarding citizenship or social justice. They conveyed that this specific set of goals would not have been met, for example, by pursuing volunteer management positions within the non-profit sector.

Brown’s (2004) post-college decision-making process. The experiences referenced above provided participants with four years of experience from which to draw
when considering their post-college plans. The decision-making process outlined by Brown (2004) involves taking stock, developing criteria, making onboard adjustments, getting connected, and narrowing options and making decisions. In general, participants in this study conveyed a sense of continually reflecting (taking stock) on their experiences over the past four years, developing criteria that would influence their subsequent decision to pursue a master’s in student affairs.

However, most participants described this process as ongoing until they recognized student affairs as a career option, which in some cases meant until they recognized its existence. Some participants could recount a specific conversation with a student affairs professional who introduced them to the field. The manner in which participants shared this aspect of their journey, these specific conversations about the field were the only reported adjustment during their search (onboard adjustment), and in some ways served to connect them to the field in which they were already intimately involved. Further, most participants expressed that they remember almost immediately deciding to pursue a career in the profession after recognizing it as an option.

Nora felt the need to pursue other fulltime employment and gain professional experience before she was willing to take the steps necessary to enter the field, but her story suggests that she was drawn to the possibility almost immediately upon being told by a mentor that she would likely make a good student affairs professional. This aspect of her journey may offer a challenge to social cognitive career theory (Hackett & Betz, 1981) and Brown’s (2004) model. Despite receiving praise and encouragement, which social cognitive career theory states should develop ones career efficacy and subsequent
pursuit of the related profession, Nora postponed following this path for a number of years. Conversely, Nora’s choice suggests that in pursuit of careers in student affairs, potential professionals need to not only receive praise and encouragement regarding their ability to complete the professional responsibilities of the field, but also succeed in meeting the qualifications along the way. Nora expressed that while she was drawn to student affairs, she did not immediately pursue the field because of the need to continue on to graduate school. Nora could have been “tired” of school, but she also could have received limited encouragement as to her academic ability to succeed in such an endeavor.

Connections can also be seen to Bethany’s story, who, despite years of professional experience in student affairs, pursued graduate work partly influenced by her families prioritization of education. Haley and Jaeger (2012) found that student affairs professionals went back to school to complete doctoral work, often with a focus on career development. For Nora and Bethany, their enrollment in master’s programs seems to have occurred for similar reasons.

Participants most clearly discussed getting connected to jobs and graduate institutions, perhaps because they could most easily point to specific conversations and others who assisted in this process. However, this specific step of Brown’s (2004) model appears to not hold as much importance in deciding to enter the profession as it does in Brown’s study exploring students’ paths to their specific post-collegiate positions. Still, given Nora’s difficulty finding employment without a master’s degree in the field, it is
unclear whether or not participants would have continued to pursue student affairs had they not been connected to specific graduate institutions.

Brown’s (2004) suggests if one reflects appropriately on their prior experiences, they will reach a decision congruent with the strengths, values, and experiences of the individual. In the present application of Brown’s (2004) model to the decision to pursue student affairs as a career path, the model is found to be lacking in its applicability as a result of a challenge faced by student affairs, that of apparent limited visibility to undergraduate students that are extensively involved (Haley & Jaeger, 2012; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Brown’s model seems to assume unlimited information to be used in the taking stock and developing criteria phases the decision-making process. However, in the case of Bethany, despite her numerous involvement and leadership roles within the community engagement office, she was unaware of the field until a year after the conclusion of her undergraduate education. Examining the stories of Rochelle, Nora, and Bethany, the findings from this study indicate a need for an external actor to introduce the idea of student affairs as a potential career before individuals are able to effectively take stock and develop criteria that reflect their strengths and passions.

Further, Nora’s experiences suggest that the path to deciding on a specific area within a larger field, even one that appears to be characterized by a series of intentional choices and goal-seeking behavior, is not clearly recognized within Brown’s (2004) model. Nora’s path has been consistently characterized by interruptions and her response to changing conditions as opposed to her receiving specific experiences and positions which she intentionally sought out. Brown’s model leaves little room to accommodate
the spontaneous and unplanned alterations, beyond simply suggesting that through such random or unplanned events, individuals *get connected* with different opportunities. The findings of this study suggest that perhaps more empirical research should be conducted to validate or challenge Brown’s model of post-college decision-making.

Additionally, consistent with prior findings regarding the role of external conflicts influencing college student career decision-making (Gati & Amir, 2010), the participants in this study were generally career focused and were willing to travel across the country to pursue a graduate program and later positions that met their search criteria. Further, findings that suggest external forces (i.e., family members) play a larger role later in one’s career (Duffy & Dik, 2009) were further supported through Bethany’s reflection of how her thought process has changed as a result of her engagement, Nora’s statement that she would like to move closer to family, and how Rochelle and her boyfriend placed an emphasis on her job search as opposed to his. For all three of these participants, they each expressed a desire to place an increased emphasis on family and important others in their life during their next job search. In integrating this aspect of the participants’ journeys with other statements they made, there are some possible interpretations. Given then intentionality and purpose with which these participants approached their professional preparation, after an extended period in their current positions, participants may begin to wonder as to the trade off between following one’s personal and professional passion and the previous relationships they held. More likely is that participants recognized their lack of ties and responsibilities in this period of their life and
prioritized their professional goals while they could, a belief that was directly stated by Nora.

Factors Influencing Persistence

The second research question in this study is concerned with factors that influence community engagement professionals desire to persist in the functional area. In exploring these potential factors with participants, they primarily expressed their commitment to the functional area and also identified a number of challenges they face in their current roles, some of which have been found to be applicable to new student affairs professionals generally (Lorden, 1998; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). As the congruence between new professionals commitment to the functional area has been explored above, this section will focus on the challenges participants cited they experience in their current positions. After exploring general challenges faced by new student affairs professionals, two additional factors (authenticity and community impact) that are more directly related to community engagement will be explored.

The intent for each participant to persist was influenced by a number of different aspects of their position, including the stress level (Lorden, 1998), continual event planning, and personal investment in the work. The four challenges Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) found that new professionals struggle with, (e.g., establishing identity as a professional, adjusting to the professional culture of their campus, advancing their education around student affairs, and seeking advice from mentors), were reflected in the stories of the participants. However, participants did not always frame these aspects of their professional positions as challenges. In fact, for Bethany, maintaining a learning
orientation was a personal approach to her work that alleviated much of the stress that other participants discussed. All participants mentioned the quality of the supervisory relationship (Tull, 2006) as being respectful, understanding, and committed to the advancement of the participants’ professional goals.

Support from the larger organization or division of student affairs on each campus (Boehman, 2007) was a conflict for each participant, but none conveyed the sense that this conflict was overwhelming or detrimental to their work. This usually took the form of conflicting goals; the participants were primarily concerned with contributing to student learning while the institutions administrative leaders tended to want numbers and data. Some professionals shared that they attempted to balance the call for larger numbers of students involved in service. In contrast, Bethany deliberately decreased the number of students who could be involved in a two-day service program so as to better ensure the student learning outcomes and intentionality of one of her programs.

Further research limited to mid-level student affairs professionals indicated that factors related to recognition of expertise, professional relationships, and opportunities for career development were important factors related to job satisfaction (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). The stories shared by the participants in this study suggest that for new professionals recognition of expertise is also important, while opportunities for career development and professional relationships were less relevant for some. Most participants mentioned specific aspects of their positions that afforded them opportunities to further develop their professional skills outside of their position description, but the importance of these opportunities was not as evident for those professionals who did not
have a clear plan for their future. An oft-cited issue regarding career satisfaction for student affairs professionals is the limited number of opportunities for advancement in the field (Lorden, 1998; Rosser & Javiner, 2003). The lack of clear goals expressed by participants in this study suggests that not only may there be limited opportunities for advancement within the field, the advancement opportunities that do exist may not be in line with the aspirations of these professionals.

Each of the participants mentioned the ways in which their expertise in the field of community engagement was recognized. Both Ryan and Rochelle expressed that they were under-qualified based on the listed qualifications for their current positions. Yet the search committee conveyed that their prior experiences had prepared them in terms of knowledge and skills beyond that of other professionals with prior full-time experience. Nora and Bethany found their prior experiences and knowledge respected through the autonomy granted by their supervisors to plan and coordinate the initiatives for which they were responsible. This aspect of the participants’ journeys both supports Rosser and Javinar’s (2003) findings related to career satisfaction, and further their findings to indicate the different ways in which supervisors and institutions may convey to new professionals recognition of their expertise.

The participants in this study all received messages that they were prepared to enter the functional area beyond the listed qualifications. Renn and Hodges (2007) found that towards the end of new professionals first year in their positions, they become more aware of their needs for additional training. This was an interesting silence in the study; participants did not mention any additional need for training, although some discussed
their ability to grow and develop through taking on additional responsibility. The quotes used in Renn and Hodges (2007) study reference both on the job learning and development as well as specific training opportunities. Perhaps the lack of participants’ reference to training in aspects of their position was related to their prior intentional development towards holding these positions and the unspoken messages they received regarding their competency.

In regards to professional relationships (Rosser & Javinar, 2003), participants had varying degrees of understanding and investment both externally and internally as new student affairs professionals employed at generally large research institutions. Most participants did not share anecdotes regarding their involvement with other on-campus departments; instead they were primarily focused on colleagues within their present office. Participants reported good relationships with their supervisors, describing their professional relationship in terms that implied mutually constructed responsibilities. The importance of synergistic supervisory relationships have been explored in the research (Tull, 2006). However, these relationships have been described as possessing a number of qualities, some of where were not evident in the narratives, such as a discussion of long term career goals, as mentioned above. In general, the stories shared by these participants suggest that the responsibilities of those new to the field or in entry-level roles at generally large research institutions are afforded few opportunities to develop connections on campus outside of their department.

All participants recognized their involvement with community partners, although maintaining these relationships often was the responsibility of an undergraduate student
intern or employee. Participants rarely conveyed a sense that these relationships contributed to any aspect of their career satisfaction, challenging in some ways prior research indicating their importance (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Another possible explanation for the lack of perceived importance of these relationships could be that the new professionals in these positions do not view the staff at community agencies as professional colleagues, and therefore do not necessarily value these relationships in the same way as they might value those with student affairs colleagues.

Ryan’s efforts to further develop relationships with community partners may have contributed to a lower satisfaction in his position. His story suggested that the administration did not fully appreciate his role in developing these partnerships as serving the dual purpose of providing volunteer opportunities for students as well as managing the university’s image in the community, two of the many goals which can be advanced by community engagement programs (Furco & Holland, 2009). Although Ryan was able to develop a number of lateral professional relationships, his struggle to develop professional relationships with those consisting of the administration that were mutually understanding and supportive of his work in the community may have tangentially contributed to his willingness to apply for doctoral work.

In addition to the factors referenced above found in the literature, two other factors related to job satisfaction were evidenced in the narratives provided by Nora and Bethany. Nora discussed her desire to be more authentic in her mentorship of students around social issues, while Bethany discussed the ethical dilemma of sending students into communities to interact with vulnerable populations to advance their own learning.
"Authenticity or “faking it?” Some literature exists around the concept of authenticity and identity in various student affairs contexts. This research (Jones, Kim, Skendall, 2012) focuses on individuals’ socio-cultural identities and how individuals may alter the degree to which they choose to be authentic in particular contexts. There also exists limited exploration of how the concept of authenticity can be applied to individual student affairs professionals who must balance their need to be representative of an institution that may have its own cultural rules and norms while simultaneously charged with teaching students to respect diversity and individual differences (Arminio & Jones, 2012). Further, issues of career and institutional fit for new student affairs professionals have been explored in the literature (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Nora’s experience in her current position serves to expand these findings beyond authenticity based on socio-cultural identity and general institutional fit.

Nora shared that one of the primary reasons she does not want to continue in community engagement is that she does not think that she can continue to “fake it.” This comment expands the concept student affairs professionals’ authenticity to that of internal beliefs and passions. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Nora’s comments about “faking it” suggest that new professionals receive and internalize messages from others in the field regarding unspoken qualifications and orientations regarding what type of professional is suitable to pursue positions focused on community engagement. Since Nora referenced these feelings of inauthenticity as a primary factor for her desire to pursue a different functional area of student affairs, it is possible that finding institutions, departments, and functional areas which afford new professionals the opportunity to find
congruence between their personal beliefs and values is an important factor in exploring issues of persistence in the future.

Further, her ample experience coordinating service programs has led her to interrogate the results and purpose of community service, further contributing to her feelings of being “jaded.” In a study exploring mid-career teachers, Coulter and Lester (2011) found that although participants occasionally referred to feelings of being “jaded,” they framed this conceptualization as becoming more realistic and it did not influence their desire to teach. In contrast, Nora did not describe her prior experiences as leading her to become more realistic. Some new professionals, such as Rochelle, believe that the focus of community engagement positions in higher education on inspiring students to embrace life changes and active citizenship. Nora’s statement suggests that her own lack of belief in the effectiveness of these programs may directly influence her ability to work to accomplish these goals in the long run.

*Using vulnerable populations to advance student learning.* In Ivan Illich’s (1968) seminal speech, he warned, “you will not help anybody by your good intentions” (p. 453). Bethany shared that she is beginning to struggle with similar issues in her work, specifically wondering about the potential harm that can result to communities from engaging students in service. This highlights the dichotomy ever present in service-learning engagement, expressed in Stoecker and Tryon’s (2007) question, “who is served by service learning” (p. 1) that only Bethany expressed she had begun to engage with through an internal dialogue. Some practitioners may believe that simply matching the institutions ability to provide volunteers to serve community agencies is evidence of
mutuality enough, without recognizing the complications and challenges that result as often privileged and uninformed students engage in service.

Although reciprocity is often highlighted as a necessary aspect of service-learning programs (Dostilio et al., 2012; Jacoby, 1996; King, 2004), it can look different within different programs and institutions and the word can have different meanings to practitioners and researchers (Dostilio et al., 2012). For both Bethany and Nora, their prior experiences have caused them to question their involvement in service, wondering what the effects of their work on the community truly are and if the (lack of) results of their work and potential harm are worth the effort and student learning that results. In their exploration of community voice and purposes of engaging students in service to community partners, Stoecker and Tryon (2009) suggest that some community agencies have come to expect this lack of results. It is unclear at this point whether or not these beliefs will lead them to become disillusioned with the field of community engagement, although for Nora it appears to have been a major concern in developing her intention to move on to a more general student activities position.

Despite the commitment and dedication that these four new student affairs professionals expressed to community engagement, they were easily able to identify challenges they faced in their work. Most of these challenges were not specific to the community engagement aspect of their positions. However, the internal struggles faced by those who had experience in the field before pursuing their master’s suggests that recognizing the challenges unique to the community engagement aspect of these
positions takes longer to develop. It remains to be seen how these challenges will influence the participants’ intentions to persist in the functional area.

Implications for Practice

The stories of participants in this study highlight a number of implications for practice involving community engagement. In particular, results suggest there are ample implications for undergraduate service experiences, graduate preparation programs, new professionals, and their supervisors. Following this, I discuss potential future avenues for research.

Implications for Structuring Undergraduate Service Programs

The findings from this study suggest that the decision to pursue community engagement as a professional career is largely influence by individuals’ undergraduate involvement in community engagement programs. To this end, there are a number of implications for student affairs professionals in community engagement positions charged with coordinating these experiences for students. The journeys of these professionals indicate that there may be a link between the length and quality of involvement and their development of a passion and professional commitment to community engagement. This suggests that involving students from their first year on campus could be a key factor in ensuring positive and lasting outcomes as a result of their participation.

The stories indicate that engaging students in leadership roles is influential in developing their understanding of student affairs as a field and developing confidence in their ability to be successful. Designing undergraduate service experiences that afford
students the opportunity to participate, reflect, and continue to be challenged across their undergraduate career appears to be related to developing passionate and committed student affairs professionals focused on promoting community engagement. Further, the findings support prior research suggesting structuring service opportunities for undergraduate students that include direct contact with members of the community they are serving may be key in promoting students' development and understanding around diversity (e.g., Jones & Hill, 2001).

Despite the influential experience of structuring undergraduate service programs to include direct contact with community members, the struggle Bethany reflected on regarding her belief that aspects of fostering direct contact with community members can also be an ethical struggle for some professionals. Integrating these two aspects of undergraduate service experiences, ensuring direct contact with clients and the potential harm that may result from doing so, suggests that those facilitating service programs should consider developing intentional training programs for students before they are given the opportunity to develop these direct relationships.

**Implications for Graduate Preparation Programs**

There are also a number of implications for graduate preparation programs. For example, although no participant expressed that they chose the program they enrolled in as a result of the specific assistantship they received, this did factor into their decision. As these participants knew before applying to institutions that they wanted to focus their career on community engagement, graduate program faculty and assistantship coordinators may further their partnership with divisions of student affairs to consider
offering assistantships focused on community engagement specifically. Pending future research exploring paths into other functional areas, graduate program faculty may evaluate the range of offices with assistantships available and how this may influence recruitment efforts.

Although participants exhibited goal-seeking behavior and intentionally sought out experiences that would better equip them with the practical skills and experience necessary to pursue these positions, for most participants, this goal-seeking behavior was limited to attaining practical experience and not developing their intellectual understanding of the research base around community engagement. Graduate preparation programs are limited in the time they have to instruct students in the best practices of each functional area, but faculty or assistantship supervisors should emphasize the importance of acquiring content specific knowledge beyond that which can be gained from practical experience alone. Perhaps introducing a research paper based in the exploration of the best practices associated with students’ functional area of interest in the final year of the master’s program could be a first step in ensuring emerging professionals are knowledgeable of the best practices literature.

Further, the extent to which the graduate programs the participants attended were infused with social justice education is unclear from our conversations. Still, it appeared as though those participants who had a prior background in social justice were able to benefit more fully from the available opportunities to continue to engage intellectually with social justice. Graduate programs that intend to advance students understanding around the connections between higher education and affecting positive social change
may consider making these connections more explicit and pervasive than they currently may be.

In a review of the websites of the graduate programs attended by the participants, only one made any explicit reference to social justice as an overarching theme of the program, one had a course specifically dedicated to exploration of social justice issues, while another limited their discussion of social justice to the faculty interests section. There are a number of practices that may be considered in attempting to make social justice a focus of graduate programs that strive to develop an understanding of related topics among their students. For example, infusing social justice language into promotional materials, creating courses specifically designed to promote students’ understanding of social justice, and furthering developing the pervasiveness of social justice issues across required courses may all be influential in developing student affairs professionals with a deeper understanding and appreciation for infusing social justice efforts and education in their work.

Graduate program faculty or assistantship supervisors may also explore ways in which to infuse consideration of multiple stakeholders into the preparation of future professionals. Although participants in this study each mentioned, to varying degrees, the extent to which community partners had a voice or their potential outcomes were considered, often times participants expressed concern or struggle over some aspect of this relationship. Engaging future professionals in a process of critically analyzing the outcomes of their work, not just on students but the institution, local community, and international reach of the university, may be beneficial beyond those aspiring to
community engagement roles. Exploring how their work influences more than the individual students and community agencies community engagement professionals work with may also contribute to a broader understanding of their role within the higher education system.

Implications for New Professionals and their Supervisors

Considerations also exist for new professionals and their supervisors. Given the stress that can result from envisioning one’s job as facilitating others to meet the needs of those who make use of services traditionally associated with community partner agencies, new professionals may benefit from developing coalitions and discussing ideas with colleagues at other institutions or service agencies. Working with others to reframe their experience so as to more clearly recognize a larger effort to influence change may help to alleviate some of the stress associated with feelings of isolation. New professionals may also consider making a greater effort to develop professional relationships across the division of student affairs and the institution; fostering these connections may introduce new professionals to the political climate of the university and identify potential partnerships and collaborations in advancing their mission.

Given the lack of unity as to the purpose of community engagement evidenced through the narratives of the participants, it may be beneficial for new professionals and their supervisors to clearly define and reflect on the anticipated student learning outcomes of participating in these programs. Through this process, both parties may reflect on their priorities and develop a working consensus and understanding of each other’s and the institution’s goals. Individuals in hiring roles should clearly communicate the office’s
philosophy and approach to community engagement when interviewing potential new professionals in an effort to assure congruence between professionals’ understanding and approach to their work and the anticipated outcomes. Doing so has been linked to more effective recruitment and retention of new professionals (Belch, Wilson, and Dunkel, 2009). The effectiveness of sharing an office’s philosophy and approach to their work when hiring is dependent on recent higher education and student affairs graduates searching for positions that match their values and not simply accepting the first position offered.

Additionally, individuals in this study were able to come to seemingly solidified internal definitions regarding the purpose and goals of community engagement work by the conclusion of their undergraduate career. This is evidenced in Rochelle’s struggle with her assistantship supervisor and Bethany’s search for a graduate program that would afford her opportunities to continue to develop along the avenues that she deemed important. Although difficult in practice, this suggests that perhaps those in hiring roles should consider the philosophical orientation towards community engagement of the institution attended by a potential hire at the time of their undergraduate enrollment.

Although not all institutions ground their community engagement work in social justice, this language was used in a number of the position descriptions shared by participants. As such, elucidating some of the implications for practice related to advancing social justice education seems appropriate. Participants’ language conveyed varied levels of understanding around social justice concepts, despite language referencing social justice included in most position descriptions, the Council for the
Advancement of Standards (2010) suggestions for service-learning programs, and the ACPA/NASPA competencies (2010). As the journeys of the new professionals in this study indicate, developing a deep and meaningful understanding of social justice and systemic social issues may largely occur as a result of undergraduate involvement. Further, social cognitive career theory has been applied to undergraduate students’ engagement with social justice, the findings of which suggest that students’ interest in social justice was directly related to their commitment to participate in future activities (Miller, et al., 2009). In order to develop this interest within undergraduate students, it may be beneficial for new professionals, who hope to foster an understanding of social justice in their students, to create initiatives that explicitly promote this and attempt to pique students’ interest in further engagement as opposed to being guided by tenets of social justice education. Additionally, given participants’ own varied understanding of social justice, those in supervisory roles may want to ensure on-going professional development for staff members who have not had strong social justice training.

Also evidenced in the stories of some of the participants are questionable or unorganized hiring processes at some institutions. Participants shared stories of communication that ceased and cancelled interview offers when participants expressed that they were going to continue job searching until they had an offer of employment. Such practices appear to have left participants hurt and frustrated. Institutional human resource offices may consider evaluating their hiring practices in an effort to eliminate confusion and the appearance of unprofessional behavior to future student affairs professionals.
Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study identify a number of areas in which future research may be conducted. This study provided valuable insight and an initial exploration into those experiences that may influence an individual’s desire to pursue a specific functional area within student affairs. Future research is needed to explore differing paths to determine if the intentionality expressed by the participants in this study is represented in other functional areas such as wellness or student conduct. This research should be conducted with special attention given to those areas that do not provide ample opportunities for student involvement at the undergraduate level, such as assessment and development. What prior experiences influence an individual’s desire to hold these positions and what implications do these have for the field and graduate preparation programs? These are questions to be pursued.

The findings from this study regarding authenticity and congruence of personal and professional philosophy towards service are also areas of interest for future research, specifically related to persistence within the field and advising effectiveness. There are potential applications and future research implications when considering comparing the findings related to authenticity and congruence to other functional areas, such as student conduct (i.e., punishment versus restorative justice) and multicultural programs. Do issues of authenticity and congruence, specifically related to issues of professional philosophy, influence student affairs professionals within these, or other, functional areas? How might graduate preparation programs better prepare students to handle differing expectations within specific functional areas?
Although the focus of this research is on those professionals employed at urban institutions, the intentionality and reasons given resulting in employment at an urban institution raises questions regarding the professionals employed at rural institutions. Have they also made a conscious geographic decision to pursue community engagement work in these communities? Do community engagement professionals at rural institutions have similar prior experiences that led them to pursue this functional area? If the prior experiences between these two groups are dissimilar, how do these experiences influence potential programming differences and philosophical orientation to service?

As mentioned, the findings of this study suggest that there are a variety of approaches to community engagement work that a professional may hold. Future research may continue to explore how these differing perspectives influence student learning outcomes or understanding of their own identities. Further, how do these differing orientations influence students’ personal lives and career paths post-graduation? How do the findings of this study differ when including professionals who engage students in service through short-term domestic and international travel, such as Alternative Break programs?

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The nature of narrative research and the research questions necessitates that participants are reflecting and retelling experiences from years into their past. They may have minimized or overemphasized the importance of some individuals or events that were influential in shaping the direction of their lives. Additionally, although the use of technology enabled me to solicit and speak
with individuals across the country, such distance may have still limited the closeness and comfort of these relationships, in turn limiting what they were willing to share. As participants often completed the interviews in their office, questions regarding the experiences, specifically the challenges, faced by these new professionals in their current role may have not been answered entirely truthfully. These aspects may have influenced my interpretations and conclusions.

The transferability of this study’s findings is also limited for a number of reasons. The sampling criteria for this study limited the population of those student affairs professionals pursuing community engagement work severely and should be noted when considering transferability. Further, as narrative research places emphasis on the unique nature of individuals’ lives and experiences, the findings detailed in this study are specific to the individual. This limits transferability to other individuals even if the context is similar to those aspects outlined in the sampling criteria.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore those prior experiences that have led new student affairs professionals to hold positions focused on community engagement as well as the factors influencing their desire to persist in this functional area. The findings from this study point to the importance of several undergraduate experiences in developing students’ interest in pursuing student affairs as a career, and community engagement as a functional area specifically. These experiences included extensive involvement in co-curricular service as undergraduate students, the role of mentors, and student employment in student affairs offices. Factors such as emotional investment and
attachment, low pay, authenticity, and ethics were all referenced as challenges faced by the new professionals in community engagement.

The findings of this study contribute to the limited research on new student affairs professionals. The narratives of the new professionals interviewed for this study illuminate the nuances and subtleties evident when examining a single functional area of student affairs. Implications for practice include suggestions for those coordinating community engagement programs, graduate faculty, as well as new professionals and their supervisors. The findings of this study suggest that future research specific to other functional areas of student affairs may identify further uniqueness and professional challenges faced across the field. Exploring the narratives of these new professionals in community engagement highlights the passion, dedication, and complexity of individual journeys that have led each of them to their current position engaging students in service and leadership opportunities.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview 1: In this interview I will ask you to briefly introduce me to your current position. After talking about that for a little while, we will move into how your career aspirations have changed over time.

1) Can you tell me about your current position and your major responsibilities?
   a) What are you major activities/duties?
   b) Can you describe the people that you work with most closely - supervisors and students?
   c) How long have you held this position?

2) Can you walk me through your career aspirations throughout your life?
   a) What did you want to be when you were five years old?
   b) What did you want to do when you were 13 years old?
   c) When you were in college, what were you planning to do after you graduated?

3) Can you tell me more about what drew you to each of these professions?
   a) For each memory, review the environmental context, influential people that supported this aspiration.

4) Tell me about the highlights of your college experience?
   a) What was your major(s)?
   b) Were you employed in college? Where did you work? Any internships?
c) Did you participate in any student groups?

5) When you think about your current position, what moments in your life do you think were the most influential in leading you here?

   a) What events, people, or experiences led you to consider this kind of position?

6) Is there anything else you would like to add? Are their important aspects that we haven’t touched on yet?

Review next steps.
Interview 2: During this interview we will review your time from college graduation through accepting your first position after receiving your masters.

1) When did you first realize student affairs was a career? How?
   a) What prompted you to consider going in to student affairs as a career?
   b) Were there individuals that prompted you to consider the field?
   c) What aspects of the field did you find most enticing?
   d) What motivated you to apply for a HESA/CSP masters program?

2) What did you do directly after your undergraduate graduation?

   If applicable discuss experiences after college but before master’s program:

   2.1) How did you find out about that opportunity?

      a) What other opportunities were you considering at that time?
      b) What factors did you consider when choosing between available options?
      c) What were your major activities?
      d) Can you describe the people you worked with?
      e) What did you learn from this experience?

3) Can you describe for me your experience in your masters program?

   a) Can you describe your academic experience for me?
      1) Who were your most meaningful professors?
      2) What were the most important lessons you learned from them?
      3) Did you try to focus your experience at all (e.g. through research activities, practicum, or electives)?
b) Did you have an assistantship?
   1) If so, what was your position?
   2) What were your major activities?
   3) Who did you work with? Can you describe your students/supervisor/coworkers?

c) What kinds of practicum or internship opportunities did you pursue, if any?
   1) If so, what was your position(s)?
   2) What were your major activities?
   3) Who did you work with?
   4) Think about your job search process. What types of positions were you looking for?
      a) How did your experience in your masters program prepare you for the positions you wanted to apply for?
      b) What positions were you most excited about?
      c) What were the factors did you consider when applying to an open position?
      d) What factors deterred you from applying to other positions?
      e) What factors did you consider when accepting your current position?

5) Is there anything else you would like to add? Are their important aspects that we haven’t touched on yet?

Review next steps.
Interview 3: In this interview, we will discuss your experiences in your current position as well as your future professional goals.

Review specifics of current position detailed in the first interview. Anything to add?

1) Coming in to your present position, what were your expectations of what your role would be?

2) In what ways has your experience in your current position matched your expectations?
   a) What still excites you about this position?
   b) In what aspects of your position have you experienced the most growth, personally or professionally?
   c) What has surprised you the most about your current position?

3) How do you define success with your current position?
   a) What has your experience been like striving to meet your personal definition of success?
   b) In what ways might this be different from how the larger institution views your level of success in this position? Your supervisor?

4) When thinking about the next 4 years, where do you see yourself moving professionally?
   a) Are there aspects of your current position that make it difficult to see yourself doing this work long term?
   b) What aspects of your current position would you like to see in your next position?
5) Is there anything else you would like to add? Are there important aspects that we haven’t touched on yet?

Review next steps.
Appendix B: Recruitment E-Mail

Hello,

I am Sophie Tullier, a second year master’s student at The Ohio State University in the Higher Education and Student Affairs master’s program. I am conducting my thesis research on the prior experiences of new student affairs professionals who are currently holding positions focused on community engagement and co-curricular service-learning and their desire to persist in these roles.

This research is intended to provide the field of student affairs a more detailed understanding of the reasons why individuals choose to enter student affairs. By focusing on one functional area, this research will examine the findings of earlier research that homogenize the field of student affairs as a collection of individuals with similar motivations without appreciating the diversity of roles and responsibilities available in the field. Further, this research will examine factors that contribute to individuals holding these positions desire to persist in these roles. Through engaging with these questions, I hope you will be able to reflect on your professional practice, personal foundations, and commitment to the field.
For this study, I am looking for new student affairs professionals who meet the following criteria:

1) have received a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs or college student personnel within the past 3 years;
2) currently hold a a) full-time, b) institutionalized position c) at an urban; d) four-year, research institution; e) where 100% of your time; f) is spent coordinating or supporting local community engagement activities such as volunteerism, community service, or service-learning which is not tied to an academic course; g) which has the potential to expose students to an array of social and environmental issues, and;
3) have or be able to gain internet access and a form of internet based video conferencing, such as Skype.

Participation in this project will involve three interviews conducted via internet based video conferencing during the fall semester, lasting one hour each, for a total of three hours. You will have the opportunity to review my interpretation of the experiences conveyed through each interview via email or follow-up interview.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you are interested in being a part of this research, I would appreciate it if you would e-mail me at Tullier.ls@osu.edu with a statement of your interest.

Please feel free to e-mail me with any questions.

Sincerely,
Sophie Tullier

This research is conducted under the direction of Dr. Susan R. Jones, Associate Professor, Educational Policy and Leadership, Higher Education and Student Affairs.