MANAGING AN OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS AMIDST THE GREAT RESIGNATION

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ABSTRACT

MANAGING AN OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS AMIDST THE GREAT RESIGNATION

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The topic for this dissertation research centers on the retention of student affairs professionals amidst The Great Resignation, specifically within three functional areas in higher education student affairs, cultural centers, student organization advising, and academic advising and their experiences of secondary traumatic stress. Figley (1995) defined STS as "the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other–the stress of wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (p. 7). In order to identify why higher education student affairs professionals in the three functional areas remain in the field, a constructivist narrative approach will be used.

Dedicated to all of the HESA professionals who still believe in the work.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In reporting the 2022 results of the Higher Education Employee Retention Survey, Bichsel et al. (2022) concluded that "higher ed in general is facing a crisis in retaining its talent" (para. 29). Similarly, Moody (2022), highlighting a comparison to survey results from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (para 1) reported a 14 percentage-point "spike" in professionals planning to leave their jobs within the next 12 months (para. 2). As shown in these indicators, colleges, and universities are experiencing a crisis in retaining higher education professionals –arguably mirroring a parallel phenomenon unfolding in the national context.

The topic for this dissertation research centers on the retention of student affairs professionals amidst The Great Resignation. Texas A&M University organizational psychologist, Anthony Klotz, coined the term "The Great Resignation" as he witnessed people, due to the pandemic's impact, re-evaluating what they were getting out of their careers (Tallo, 2021). Vinson (2022) wrote about how higher education has been impacted by The Great Resignation, "Higher education is not immune from this great exodus and is at a turning point as retention of faculty, administrators, and staff is more important than ever" (para. 1). The article goes into some detail about ways that work-life balance, advancement opportunities, remote or in-person work, productivity demands, and other work-related stressors may be to blame. What may be considered a unique experience, higher education student affairs (HESA) professionals not only worked to manage the impact of COVID-19 for themselves, they continued doing the emotional and mental labor of supporting students through a traumatic reality. The Great Resignation

did more than spark re-evaluation for HESA professionals; for many, it created a space of reflection to ensure that they were at their best while supporting their students. That is why this study will explore the experiences of HESA professionals who have experienced secondary traumatic stress, as measured by the Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP) (Lynch & Glass, 2018). and what, from their perspectives, has kept them doing work that may be responsible for their secondary trauma.

Statement of the Problem

Attrition among HESA professionals has been a topic of conversation for decades (Grant & Foy, 1972; Evans, 1988; Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016). One common thread from attrition research is that new professionals, serving five years or less, were experiencing burnout, and before reaching a state of burnout, professionals may experience secondary traumatic stress (e.g., Marshall et al., 2016). With the impact of COVID-19 and The Great Resignation (Tallo, 2021), however, various sectors – including higher education student affairs -- have begun to see increasing numbers of professionals transition out of their work, to opportunities that offer more flexibility, more money, and more support for well-being. Consequently, an urgent need has emerged for new research on HESA professionals' direct experiences related to The Great Resignation, including the retention of higher education student affairs (HESA) professionals, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress.

This study is situated between the phenomenon, The Great Resignation, and the framework, of secondary traumatic stress, as a way to contribute to addressing this problem. Specifically, the study aims to understand the experiences and attributions HESA professionals share regarding their decisions to remain in the field, even after

supporting students through traumatic events. Understanding why professionals remain in the field can positively inform supervisors', departments', and institutions' practices concerning the retention of staff during a climate of mass exodus. With the findings, I suggested concrete ways that HESA professionals can be supported differently by the profession and supervisors.

Justification of the Problem

Although in the original framing of the phenomenon, Klotz was looking across disciplines, The Great Resignation has become a prevalent topic of conversation in HESA (Schroeder, 2022; Kelliher, 2022; Brightbill, 2021; Schroeder, 2021; Stebleton & Buford, 2021). In the March 2022 Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) Compass Report, *Charting the Future of Student Affairs*, Kelliher (2022) found that a large majority of responding professionals named burnout as a contributing factor for leaving the field, "84%[sic] of survey respondents think that individuals leave the field because stress levels and crisis management responsiveness required for the role lead to burnout" (p. 24). Moody (2022) used the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) May 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey (n=3815) to further explore the retention problem facing higher education and reported that more than half the respondents were likely to look for other positions within the next year (para 1.).

When HESA professionals leave their roles, institutions have to embark on a costly process, in both time and funds, to search for new talent. Research in the field has explored and documented this cost. Marshall et al., (2016) go into more detail about the costs associated with turnover, "The expenditures associated with employee turnover,

such as recruiting, hiring, and training during a transition, are but a few of the costs associated with attrition" (p. 146). The authors cited Rosser and Javinar (2003) to illustrate the knowledge that is lost, "units lose efficiency, consistency, and quality in the delivery of services, as well as the investment made in the knowledge base of the institutions or unit" (p. 825). Additionally, Marshal et al., (2016) highlight how turnover can impact productivity, as institutions lose time, and money, along with institutional and unit productivity as new employees have to be trained to fill vacant roles with a high attrition rate (p. 146).

In sum, The Great Resignation is an expensive problem, and as institutions continue to manage the financial impacts of COVID-19, the conversation is particularly relevant now. Lynch (2017) identified seven themes that emerged from his interviews. The seventh theme illustrated the impact of support on professionals' physical and psychological health (p. 82). What Lynch's research highlighted is well beyond the financial implications of retaining staff. His findings describe the ways that professionals' experiences supporting students, and the accompanying stress, can manifest in physical and psychological symptoms. Lynch's study highlights the human cost underlying the financial losses and points to a second rationale for the proposed study. Further research is needed to understand HESA professionals' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and to identify policies and practices to address and alleviate the physical and psychological impacts that HESA professionals may suffer in their work on behalf of students and institutions.

Audience

Since the target audiences for this dissertation are wide-ranging, the four target audiences are (1) institutions of higher education (colleges and universities that employ student affairs professionals), who can use the findings of this dissertation to support professionals in the field; (2) graduate programs (specifically, Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA), College Student Personnel (CSP), and/or similar programs) who can use the findings of this dissertation to support graduate students preparing to enter the field; (3) professionals who provide supervisory support (specifically, professionals who provide supervisory support to graduate assistants and/or other student affairs professionals); and (4) responsible parties who provide wellness support (particularly audiences who can influence wellness efforts that support student affairs professionals).

Institutions of Higher Education

Institutions of higher education are responsible for retaining talent among their HESA professionals, and Boehman (2007) suggested that it is the organization's commitment and ability to value professionals that will create an increased affective attachment to the organization. As Boehman notes, "It is possible that the attrition of student affairs professionals is not just a factor of the individual not feeling committed to the organization, but also the individual not feeling valued by the organization" (p. 321). Feeling valued may be difficult to measure. However, recent research suggests that addressing issues related to (1) feeling valued in graduate programs, (2) synergistic supervision, and (3) support for well-being in human resources policies and expectations may help institutions to support HESA professionals' experiences of feeling valued by the institution (Chernoff, 2016; Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022). This study's focus

on the lived experiences of HESA professionals who have decided to remain in the field, even after their experience with secondary traumatic stress, ensures that findings will be relevant to the retention of professionals and will produce implications for measures that institutions can incorporate into practice.

Graduate Programs

As graduate programs in HESA, CSP, and similar programs are a requirement to enter the field, the findings and implications of the proposed study will be of direct interest to those programs, as they work to prepare graduate students for full-time roles as HESA professionals. Razek et al. (2016) recommended that graduate programs help candidates to (1) draw on best practices while developing and learning to manage their professional identities; (2) adapt to organizations' ever-changing cultures; (3) engage in professional development opportunities, and (4) find support with a mentor. Using these strategies, the authors note, can help graduate assistants to stay up-to-date and manage their professional careers as they move up in organizations or as they experience multiple institutions. This study will reveal specific findings that may be incorporated into program curricula to better prepare new professionals in all four of the strategies outlined by Razek et al., but that will be particularly relevant to (1) managing a professional identity and (4) finding support.

Trauma, Stress, and Student Affairs Professionals

Student Affairs

Schuh et al., (2011) articulated how the HESA field became what it is today. In the early years the professionals in the field were serving as parents (*in loco parentis*), then as institutions diversified, professionals had to pivot to managing the ever-changing

campus communities. Ultimately, professionals have had to be flexible as the needs of institutions have shifted over time (p. 75). The authors note the breadth of responsibility of HESA professionals, noting that professionals care for the entire student, including both their academic success and their healthy maturation (p. 61). Based on the history of the field, this study will focus solely on professionals who work directly with students.

The Impact of Community Trauma

The pandemic shifted how trauma in HESA has been viewed. Even before the pandemic, shared community trauma could be seen in many institutions. For example, faculty and staff working at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) experienced trauma as a community during and after the massacre on April 16, 2007 (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008). With the pandemic's global impact, most or all US colleges and universities now have a shared community trauma that can be seen in students, faculty, and staff. Due to this widespread experience of community trauma, the design of this study adopts a broad scope, exploring HESA professionals' narratives in the field at large as opposed to at a particular site institution. The impact of COVID-19 has been accompanied by the further trauma caused by continued violence against unarmed Black people dying at the hands of White people and police. Consequently, U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) are now witnessing exacerbated risks to professionals' mental and physical health, and the ways these risks can manifest in needs that institutions may or may not be able to meet.

In a 2021 *Washington Post* article, Iati described a broad phenomenon of people nearing their breaking points after two years of the pandemic. In the article, Roxane Cohen Silver, Professor of Psychological Science at the University of California at Irvine,

identified how direct and indirect exposure to tragedy can take a toll on people as a result of COVID-19, "Even if I personally have not lost a loved one to COVID, I can be seeing pictures and reading stories about the sheer tragedies. So, it's both direct and indirect exposure to the media of all of these cascading traumas that have made it so difficult to cope with it" (Iati, 2021, para. 27). During the height of the pandemic, other environmental factors impacted the population and Vaile Wright, Senior Director of Health Care Innovation for the American Psychological Association explained how the impact of so much tension (COVID-19, racial tension, the January 6th insurrection, and natural disasters) can cause people to struggle with coping:

> We're just not meant to live under this level of tension for such a prolonged period. So, what that end up doing is it really wears on our coping abilities to the point where we aren't able to regulate our emotions as well as we could before (para. 9).

As Wright stated, anti-Black violence and racial tensions were part of the conversation as people worked to regulate their emotions. An episode of *PBS News Hour* discussed that impact, particularly the impact of the imagery of Black people being shot and killed and the resulting psychological toll. *PBS News Hour* spoke to Monnica Williams, clinical psychologist and director of the Center for Mental Health Disparities at the University of Louisville, as Williams connected the viewing of graphic videos of racist violence to the experience of psychological impacts such as post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) (Downs, 2016, para. 4). These sources of community trauma, both COVID-19 and racial violence have affected the U.S. population broadly, including HESA professionals, especially those with minoritized social identities. These

widespread experiences of community trauma offer further support for the broad scope of this study, focusing on professionals' narratives across various institutions as opposed to focusing on a specific institutional site.

Higher Education's Policies and Practices in Response to The Great Resignation

Widespread community trauma has taken a toll on student affairs and The Great Resignation has created a moment for the field to reckon with the potentially long-lasting impact. One such impact has been the competitive environment that institutions are navigating as they look for new staff. Referring to the emerging competitive environment as "the recruitment and retention wars," Lundy (2022) articulated the responsibility of higher education human resources as The Great Resignation continues:

> Institutions need to determine which positions are most urgent to fill and find out what those workers most prize, whether it be flexible working arrangements, a sense of mission or community, or higher pay, and then use those tools to target the right people (para. 21).

The choice to offer flexible work arrangements, a connection to the mission, or higher pay poses significant challenges for HEIs, especially as institutions are simultaneously navigating the financial impacts of the pandemic. Lundy indicated that as human resources make necessary shifts to compete in the hiring market, the conversation calls for institutions to be mindful of HR professionals' well-being. Although well-being may be something that can initially be viewed as free, institutions have to financially support well-being efforts to retain professionals.

Theoretical Framework

The term secondary traumatic stress was coined by Charles Figley (1995); however, Figley uses the term for professionals working in social work, public school education, and counseling (Bride et al., 2007; Caringi et al., 2015; Pinto, 2001). There are several dissertations on secondary traumatic stress; several were focused on the impact of secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002) while others were focused on the entire field (Dickson & Beech, 2016; Lynch, 2017), still, others were specifically focused on functional areas like housing and student conduct (Hodge, 2017; Chernoff, 2016), and the racial and gender dynamic was highlighted as well (Clark, 2022). This study is extending previous research Hodge, 2017; Chernoff, 2016). The recent study by Clark (2022) focused solely on the experiences of black men in student affairs and their experiences with secondary traumatic stress.

This theoretical framework will be specifically applied as participants for this study will complete the Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP) (Glass & Lynch, 2018) in the first phase of the study, and only those whose results show secondary trauma will be invited to participate in the interview phase of the research. Glass and Lynch clarified their intention of the creation of the scale, “In this study, we sought to expand the understanding of secondary traumatic stress in the work of student affairs professionals by developing an instrument to quantitatively measure symptoms associated with this phenomenon” (p. 12). By using the STSAP as a baseline for participants, the researcher can ensure that all participants have, up until being interviewed, undergone a threshold of experiences that may have created secondary trauma. Consequently, they should be able to identify how they have been supported as

they continue working in student affairs. This study focused on the collection and analysis of HESA professionals' narratives, hypothesizing based on the discussion outlined above that, given the community trauma of COVID-19 and the heightened visibility of fatal racial violence, experiences of STS may be increasingly common among these practitioners.

Research Questions & Research Methods

As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, this study takes place in the context of the recent cultural phenomenon "The Great Resignation" and against the backdrop of the field's long-standing concern regarding attrition rates among HESA professionals (Grant & Foy, 1972; Evans, 1988; Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016). This study aims to understand the reasons HESA professionals describe for remaining in the field, despite having experienced secondary traumatic stress. Participants will be selected based on a score of three or higher on the Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (Glass & Lynch, 2018). The goal of this research is to assist institutions of higher education as they work to creatively support student affairs professionals. Before being selected for the interview phase of the study, participants will complete the Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP) (Glass & Lynch, 2018) to ensure that they meet the eligibility criteria, showing the significance of secondary traumatic stress. The research questions will provide more context to participant's lived experiences with secondary traumatic stress, and will also explore the resources that have helped them remain in student affairs, and ask participants to share why they are staying in the HESA profession:

- What experiences do participants recount as leading to their secondary traumatic stress?
- What resources and/or opportunities do participants identify (potentially provided by supervisor(s), departments, institutions, professional organizations, etc.) for them to be retained in the field?
- How do participants describe their reasoning in deciding to remain in student affairs?

This study employed constructivist narrative inquiry methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013), and data collection will center on semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2018). Consequently, each participant will have time to share their personal stories, if they feel comfortable doing so. Providing participants with an open structure and using a constructivist research approach helped to create an environment in which each participant was free to share their truth, something I used care with, especially when participants are discussing traumatic moments. Constructivist qualitative research methods build on "a research paradigm that recognizes that reality is constructed by those who experience it and thus research is a process of reconstructing that reality" (Mills & Birks, 2014, p. 257). I believe it was critical to reconstruct the reality of the emotional responses as participants engage in this study.

Participants

This study is focused on three focus areas that have not yet been explored in HESA research on STS: cultural centers, student organization advising, and academic advising. The rationale behind this selection comes from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s Trends Reports, published annually to identify a handful of trends in the

field that impact higher education. Over several years, these three areas (cultural centers, student organization advising, and academic advising) have seen a shift in what is expected of them and the trauma support that they are extending to students. Cultural center staff have had to pivot to be more supportive of the racial trauma that students are experiencing and in the 2021 article "The Antiracist College" the concept of antiracism was highlighted as institutions were working to counter the racial violence after the world saw the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Bartlett, 2021). Student life staff members, particularly those who support student organizations, have to mitigate potential harm that students experience in organizations and manage students' families' concerns. The 2018 article "Spotlight on Hazing" (Biemiller, 2018) and the 2019 article "The New 'In Loco Parentis'" (Patel, 2019) both named the impact of hazing on college campuses. Finally, academic advisors are doing much more than giving students their class schedules. In 2015, one of the trends articles, "Spotlight on Retention" (Hoover, 2015) showed that the role of academic advisors is drastically changing to require the use of counseling techniques with students.

Definition of Terms

To better understand the terms that will be used throughout this dissertation, Table 1 will serve as a useful reference tool. Throughout this dissertation, secondary traumatic stress may be used interchangeably with concepts like compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma and Table 1 highlights the similarities that impact those concepts. It is important to note that compassion fatigue may be a more common term whereas secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma are more closely aligned and not used as often. Additionally, burnout is specifically seen as a result of secondary traumatic

stress/compassion fatigue/vicarious trauma. Finally, attrition, for this study, focused on the intentions that professionals have to leave the HESA field.

Table 1. Definition of Terms

Term	Definition
Attrition	A reduction in numbers usually as a result of resignation, retirement, or death (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)
	Intentions to leave the field of student affairs (Naifeh, 2019, p. 34)
Burnout	A state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in emotionally demanding situations. (Pines & Aronson, 1988, p. 9)
Compassion Fatigue	More user-friendly term for secondary traumatic stress disorder, which is nearly identical to PTSD, except that it applies to those emotionally affected by the trauma of another (usually a client or family member). (Figley, 2002, p. 3)
Compassion Satisfaction	The positive feelings about people's ability to help (Stamm, 2010, p. 8)

Great Resignation	Coined by Texas A&M University organizational psychologist, Anthony Klotz, as he was witnessing people reevaluate what they were getting out of their careers because of the impact of the pandemic (Tallo, 2021)
Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)	The natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other–the stress of wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person. (Figley, 1995, p. 7)
Student Affairs Professionals	"Professionals in student affairs take into consideration a student's academic learning and healthy maturation – in other words, the whole student" (Schuh et al., 2011, p. 61)
Trauma	The unique individual experience, associated with an event or enduring conditions, in which (1) the individual's ability to integrate affective experience is overwhelmed or (2) the individual experiences a threat to life or bodily integrity. (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995, p. 60)

Vicarious Trauma	A process of change resulting from empathetic engagement with trauma survivors. (Pearlman, 1999, p. 52)

Summary

Although the Great Resignation phenomenon was named based on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in private-sector industries, the warning signs in the HESA field were named well before the start of the pandemic (Grant & Foy, 1972; Evans, 1988; Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016). The goal of this study is to explore the lived experiences of HESA professionals who have remained in the field, even during and after one or more experiences with secondary traumatic stress. The study design and use of constructivist narrative inquiry methods allowed for the reconstruction of participants' lived experiences (Mills & Birks, 2014) through shared narratives (Shay, 1994). Drawing on methodological advice from Brinkmann (2018), data collection focused on semi-structured interviews with HESA professionals in three focus areas; cultural center staff, student organization advisors, and academic advisors. Chapter 2 provides further context on the functional areas of interest for this study. Chapter 3 provides further context on narrative inquiry, the methodological approach that guided this study, and presents a detailed discussion of the study design and methods.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study targeted functional areas in HESA that have not been explored concerning secondary traumatic stress; cultural centers, student organization advisors, and academic advisors. These functional areas have not been explored in depth by scholars in the field; however, professionals in these areas have direct student contact and are often placed in positions to support students through traumatic life events. One predictor of STS in professionals is direct student contact (Chernoff, 2016), a point I explored in depth further in this chapter. Accordingly, the research design of this study required the selection of participants from the population of HESA professionals whose work entails direct student contact. Based on the theoretical framework of this study, participants were invited to share their experiences and perspectives on how direct student contact can impact their well-being. In this way, study findings focused on participants' narratives will extend the literature that has been published on this topic.

Understanding Trauma

Professionals in HESA who suppor1 students through traumatic life events may experience symptoms that are closely related to the DSM-5 defined as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and/or acute stress disorder. Ultimately, the DSM-5 defines a traumatic stressor as, "any event (or events) that may cause or threaten death, serious injury, or sexual violence to an individual, a close family member, or a close friend (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 830). As HESA professionals serve as mentors, advisors, and guides, and can even be considered family, therefore the proximity

to the student's experience may create a similar response as if the professional was present. And to clarify in some situations, the professional is present when the traumatic event occurs. In this study, indirect trauma is the focus and although future research is needed, May and Wisco (2016) looked to identify whether exposure to indirect trauma can lead to PTSD.

One aspect of individuals' experiences with trauma that can create more complexity is their specific identities, particularly in marginalized communities. People of color experience racial trauma and Williams et al. (2018) name that the impact of racism and discrimination can impact mental health (p. 23). People who are part of the LGBT+ community also experience a more vulnerable experience as they manage traumatic events (Alessi & Martin, 2017) and due to environmental factors in society, the experiences with managing trauma may have started at a young age (p. 10). Additionally, historical trauma can impact a wealth of people from various identities. Sotero (2006) highlighted how historical trauma impacts generations of communities, even after the initial trauma occurred. Historical trauma is defined as a theory that impacts populations who have historically been subjected to long-term trauma such as colonialism, slavery, war, genocide (p. 93). With this in mind, marginalized social groups are prone to this public health concern.

For the purpose of this study, the American Psychological Association's (APA) definition of trauma will be used. The APA defines trauma as:

> Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships,

and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. (American Psychological Association)

Emerging Landscape of College Student Trauma

There is one common experience that follows students throughout their college careers, and that is their understanding of their mental health. Reviewing this experience chronologically shows the nature of this experience, Soet & Sevig (2006) observed that a national conversation among HESA professionals has been steadily focused on mental health issues on college campuses over the past five years. Through the quantitative study, which identified that students with specific marginalized identities (Asian and international) were less likely to engage in counseling (p. 417), Soet & Sevig found that the implications of their study should be foundational as a way to "examine policies around student mental health, to allocate resources appropriately to mental health units, and to engage in data-based preventative programming and interventions" (p. 428). Within a matter of years, similar concerns were still the topic of conversation. Reifman (2011) wrote about poor emotional health among college students, while Younghans (2018) identified how college students under great amounts of stress created a sense of urgency to help reduce those high-stress levels (para. 4). Both scholars pointed out that marginalized identities added a layer of stress and vulnerability to mental health concerns.

The pandemic arguably worsened the situation among college students (Adedoyin, 2022). Early on, Soet & Sevig (2006) recommended that practitioners and the field in general focus on prevention strategies. That message was echoed by Yang & Mufson (2021) particularly faculty were called to adjust their expectations as intervention

strategies, such as adjusting deadlines, reducing the amount of work, and prioritizing mental health (para. 26-28). Adedoyin (2022) articulated how the pandemic only intensified students' mental health concerns, "Students struggled with mental health before the pandemic, but those problems escalated after they spent almost a year in isolation away from the typical supports university can provide" (para. 6). The university support is crucial since many college students do not get diagnosed until they are in college when they see a counselor for the first time (para. 19). Campuses cannot solely rely on counseling centers to support student's mental health as Abrams (2022) heard from Carla McCowan, Director of the Counseling Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on this topic and McCowan noted that support needs to go beyond counseling centers, "Not every student needs individual therapy, but many need opportunities to increase their resilience, build new skills, and connect with one another" (para. 13).

Students' mental health was a topic of pressing need well before the pandemic impacted campuses across the globe. It is a common thread that impacts both the students' experience and the professionals who support them, including higher education student affairs professionals. The functional areas of focus in this study—cultural centers, student organization advising, and academic advising —have all been affected, as their roles have now expanded to usher students through their mental health journeys (Pittman, 1994; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021; Dahlgren, 2017; ACPA, n.d.; Vanguri, 2010; Dunkel & Schuh, 1998; Kuhn, 2008; Ireland, 2018).

Studies on the Changing Roles of HESA Professionals

Cultural Centers

This study is not focused on professionals at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs); however, what is unique to PWIs is that cultural centers at those institutions serve a very different community than Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). For this study, participants were not limited to PWIs; but, this rationale is important as it relates to racial and ethnic identities and secondary traumatic stress. Pittman (1994) wrote about cultural centers at predominantly white campuses with the origin of the centers to serve as a safe space or a place of refuge (para. 1). Historically, in the 1960s, post-civil rights era, many college campuses saw increasing numbers of students who were Black and Latinx which in turn created a need for space for those students to be validated within their institutions (para. 5). Although this study does not focus solely on PWIs, it is important to understand how valuable cultural centers are for students of color regardless of their institution's demographic make-up and Ponjuán and Hernández (2021) confirmed that in the study on Latinx men at Texas PWIs, HSIs, and HBCUs. Ponjuán and Hernández (2021) drew from Yosso (2005), defining community cultural wealth as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (2005, p. 77).

To dig deeper into the historical context of cultural centers and multicultural student services and their responsibilities, Shuford (2011) articulated how institutional demographics impact the social identities of the students served by cultural centers, how cultural center staff supports students, and the wide range of responsibilities of cultural

centers. For example, Southern institutions' cultural centers were initially created to serve African American students whereas Southwestern institutions' cultural centers were initially created to serve Latinx and Indigenous students (p. 31). Cultural center staff are not only responsible for the ethnic and racial development of students but also for advising, “Advising multiethnic student organizations was also an important part of the office’s responsibilities. In some cases, academic support and advising were also a major part of the office” (p. 32). Shuford also found that student organization advising and academic advising overlap with professionals who work on college campuses full-time, indicating the way that cultural centers provide a wrap-around approach for students. The wide range of responsibilities shows the intersectional work that cultural center professionals are responsible for, specifically race, ethnicity, gender, sex, and sexuality (p. 33). Ultimately, cultural centers started based on the need for students of color to be supported and to have safe spaces during their collegiate careers, and cultural center professionals often have the responsibility to serve as a one-stop shop for organizational support, academic support, and overall well-being.

Student Organization Advisors

Dahlgren (2017) gave a comprehensive view of what student organization advisors do, why they do it, the changes to the role, and recommendations for the future. Student organization advisors are more than just a “concerned adult” (p. 1) but Dahlgren highlighted that advisors are tasked with “guaranteeing students sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult” (as cited by Hunter and White, 2004, p. 20) and beyond that, advisors are expected to attend meetings, work with officers, and assist with planning programs; however, advisors can be more distant but ultimately they are

responsible for the actions of the organization (ACPA, n.d., p . 2). Although the rationale may vary, student organization advisors found that they wanted to help students developmentally (Vanguri, 2010), to serve as a mentor (Vanguri, 2010), to "observe the development of students during their college matriculation" (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998, p. 13), and as a social function (Meyer & Kroth, 2010).

The role of student organization advisors has changed since Bloland (1967) first named the three functions of the role as maintenance, group growth, and program content functions (p. 3). In the early 1990s, Hudson (1993) focused on a more integrated conception of the role, informed by student development principles. Shortly after Dunkel and Schuh (1998) proposed that student organization advisors wore multiple hats: "mentors, supervisors, teachers, leaders, and followers" (p. 3). In 2006, the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) Commission for Student Involvement revisited the role of student organization advisors in their *Advisor Manual*. In the manual, the role of an advisor, similar to Dunkel and Schuh (1998) included mentor, team builder, conflict mediator, reflective agent, educator, motivator, and policy interpreter (ACPA, n.d., p. 3); however, the Commission did not include any literature to support their findings, only anecdotal findings. As a way to fill the gaps, Ferris et al., (2011) found that the main characteristics of a student organization advisor are mentors, teachers, motivators, and university policy and risk agents (p. 3). Ultimately, the role of student organization advisors is ever-changing but at the core, studies and reviews have found that there is a need for more structured training.

Recommendations for the future include training for advisors, more intentional practice, and ethical considerations. DeSawal (2007) facilitated a study that found that

almost half of their participants only felt somewhat prepared to advise student organizations when they started their first position. Additionally, Myers and Dyer (2005) noted that faculty members, who serve as advisors, felt incompetent to advise student organizations and that they did not go through any training on how to counsel or advise students. Intentional practice (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Blimling et al., 1999) includes understanding the impact of decisions along with using theory to practice. Part of this intentionality comes from assessment and Dahlgren (2017) calls for using The Council for the Advancement of Standards (2012) as a way to create standards and assessments. Ethically, Dahlgren (2017) calls for more research on the ethics of advising, how student organizations are developed, and assessment (p. 6).

Academic Advisors

Academic advising can occur with an academic advisor in a student's academic program or other spaces. Kuhn (2008) defined academic advising as, "situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter" (p. 3). Additionally, Kuhn highlighted the broad history of academic advising; from 1639 when there was no formal role for academic advising (p. 3), to 1636-1870 when students took the same courses with no electives (p. 4), to the 1870s when it was not appropriate for faculty to speak with students on personal matters (as cited by Bush, 1969, p. 599), to 1870-1970 when academic advisors were in place to manage students ability to select electives of their choosing (p. 5), and to the present moment where academic advisors are now comparative in nature, identifying which model(s) is best for their particular institution and student body (p. 7). The current evolution of academic advising, particularly supporting student's well-being, is

articulated in Ireland (2018), "They [faculty and primary-role advisors] are having career, academic, and financial conversations with students with an emphasis on connecting students to the academic and personal services they need to make college life feasible, including emergency aid, childcare and more" (para. 6). Ultimately, the author highlighted the significance of academic advising as a "critical mechanism" (para. 3) as institutions transform student's college experience.

The three functional areas that this study is focused on have each seen significant changes in the roles played by practitioners, with these roles evolving to meet the needs of students more holistically. The emerging trends that students are facing show the need for evolution to have occurred. Cultural centers have an added responsibility to keep up with current trends and support students through racially and ethnically traumatic headlines (Pittman, 1994; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021). Student organization advisors have an added responsibility to support their organizations and work to streamline standards (Dahlgren, 2017; ACPA, n.d.; Vanguri, 2010; Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). Academic advisors have an added responsibility to support students' overall well-being and not just their academic success (Kuhn, 2008; Ireland, 2018).

The Landscape of Secondary Traumatic Stress Research

A point of clarification in terms is that researchers use secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma interchangeably. Secondary traumatic stress is the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other–the stress of wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person. (Figley, 1995, p. 7), compassion fatigue is a more user-friendly term for secondary traumatic stress disorder, which is nearly identical to PTSD,

except that it applies to those emotionally affected by the trauma of another (usually a client or family member). (Figley, 2002, p. 3), and vicarious trauma is a process of change resulting from empathetic engagement with trauma survivors (Pearlman, 1999, p. 52).

The existing research on secondary traumatic stress HESA professionals is siloed by functional areas. Outside of higher education student affairs, early studies, especially, focused on counselors (e.g., Pinto, 2001), social workers (Bride, 2007; Caringi, 2015), and public-school educators (e.g., Caringi, 2015). Caringi (2015) also studied the experiences of paraprofessionals or hourly employees who serve as support staff for students with accommodations, setting up classroom spaces, and supervising group work or managing student's behavior (Will, 2022, para. 2). Outside of higher education student affairs, findings showed the reality of secondary traumatic stress as an occupational hazard in helping fields, particularly working directly with students (Chernoff, 2016). Studies all showed the need for more research and support on this topic (Chernoff, 2016; Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022).

The emerging literature is the start of creating a full landscape of STS research in HESA. Currently, research on STS in higher education student affairs contexts has focused on functional areas including student conduct (Chernoff, 2016), and residence life (e.g., Hodge, 2016). Moreover, some studies examined HESA professionals across multiple functional areas (Clark, 2022; Lynch, 2017). Chernoff's (2016) target population was full-time professionals with student conduct responsibilities. With a more specific regional focus, Hodge's (2016) target population of residence life staff has a scope of members of the Southeastern Association of Housing Officers. Clark (2022) focused

solely on Black men in student affairs, specifically with current or past employment in functional areas that are related to supporting students through a crisis. Across students in higher education student affairs, there was an awareness that there is a need for more support for professional staff who are managing secondary traumatic stress. The thread of predictors are as follows: race and gender, education and experience, training and preparation, processing trauma, and job responsibilities' impact.

Accounting for Protective & Risk Factors of Secondary Traumatic Stress in HESA

Compassion Satisfaction and Self-Care

As professionals in HESA work to blend the nature of the work and taking care of themselves, there is no one way to make that happen and for some professionals, there is enjoyment in supporting students who are managing traumatic life events. Compassion satisfaction is "the satisfaction derived from the work of helping others" (Stamm, 2002, pg. 107). A risk factor in the field can be the ways that compassion satisfaction requires solid self-care practices in order to strike that blend. Binder (2017) challenges the field to see how privilege plays a role in self-care (Rendón, 2014) and challenged the notion that the field applauds those who are over-worked while expecting professionals to be role models of self-care (p. 37). Binder (2017) references Beeler (1988) in defining the goal of promoting self-care, "The paramount goals of self-care promotion are to teach that we have an obligation to live judiciously and to foster health-enhancing environments" (p. 282). Without role models of self-care to reference, some scholars and practitioners identified ways to strike that blend such as reflective writing by blogging and engaging in yoga practice. Additionally, there is a conversation around how graduate programs

prepare professionals and the added responsibility that marginalized professionals experience as they are left responsible for their own self-care.

Blogging as a reflective practice was highlighted in Carlson (2015). Carlson (2015) identified how blogging can serve as a self-care strategy and the author cites Baker and Moore (2008) as to how it can provide space to process, "similar to diaries, blogs can provide catharsis and venting about stress and emotions in daily life" (p. 1). Outside of writing to process, Daut (2016) identified how yoga practice can help professionals process their experiences. The self-care discussion is often watered down to bubble baths and walks outside. As Daut (2016) suggested, self-care practices need an in-depth approach that considers well-being instead of a surface-level self-care opportunity. Specifically, how yoga practice can positively impact physical and mental health, including combating compassion fatigue (p. 52). Daut tasks HESA to plan for wellness which means going beyond suggesting and thinking about times when wellness breaks can occur and shifting schedules to meet that need.

As HESA graduate programs prepare students to transition to a professional role, Burke et al., (2016) found that burnout can be prevented through regular stress management in the form of mindfulness practices (p. 104). For 27 participants of the study, mindfulness practices were a program that occurred for 30 minutes, over six times in a semester (p. 96). The program included meditation, yoga, walking, reflective discussions, and muscle relaxation (pg. 97). The mindfulness practices offered structured opportunity for self-care by creating a culture of healing. That structured experience ensures that individuals are not solely responsible for their self-care. Sambile (2018) would have argued that a structured experience would be better than individual

responsibility, Sambile (2018) shared her hope for HESA, “my hope is that in the field of student affairs, we strive to transform our spaces to be rooted in care and healing” (p. 38). Although identity was not the primary focus, Sambile (2018) pointed out how marginalized communities are left responsible for their own self-care.

Professionals in HESA consistently work to strike the blend of compassion satisfaction and self-care. The scholars who have studied this topic have added to the conversation by exploring practices that provide professionals with either structured ways to manage the work of the field or individual methods to establish wellness in the field.

Measuring Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP)

Glass and Lynch (2018) surveyed over 600 HESA professionals as a means to expand what the field knows about STS and how it can be quantified based on symptoms (p. 12). They used a three-phase approach to piloting the study including item development, expert review, and pilot distribution (p. 5). They referenced the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Health Disorders (2013), the Secondary Trauma Self-Efficacy Scale (Bride, 2004), and narratives from HESA professionals who experienced trauma. The expert review was facilitated by nine professionals who reviewed the scale for its content validity. The panelists had a wealth of professional experiences, “licensed counselors working in a university setting, mid-and senior-level student affairs professionals working in various functional areas, executive leaders in student affairs professional organizations, and faculty experts in instruction development” (p. 5) and used their expertise to guide the instrument’s design.

Glass and Lynch (2018) pinpointed three implications of their study as they piloted the scale: (1) the tool can be used to gain more insight to help understand how supporting students has impacted student affairs professionals; (2) the instrument has the potential to be a helpful tool for supervisors to ensure that their direct reports are supported; and finally, (3) graduate preparation programs can use the instrument to create space for inter-group processing, as graduate students are introduced to the experience of supporting students through traumatic events (p.14). They concluded by noting what the scale is for and what it is not for, explaining "Although the instrument is not intended for diagnostic use, scholars, practitioners, supervisors, and policymakers may find it useful in further exploring the impact of secondary trauma within the context of higher education" (p. 16). By using the STSAP in the current study, the researcher can ensure that all participants have met the criterion point on the scale which shows that they have experienced STS. This will help to establish that all participants have that lived experience to then explore how they make meaning of that trauma and remain in the field.

The five themes of STS show how working in HESA can create an environment for professionals that require a level of care and support for them to be successful and be retained (Chernoff, 2016; Clark 2022; Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017). The scholars studying STS in HESA highlight areas of improvement for institutions and professional organizations to explore. As institutions and professional organizations understand the signs of STS the scale that Lynch and Glass created is a helpful tool to quantify this experience. Ultimately, as scholars identified predictors of STS, they also identified the implications for practice to identify some tangible changes in the field.

Stamm's Professional Quality of Life Scale

Stamm's Professional Quality of Life Scale was created as a tool to "measure on the negative and positive effects of helping others who experience suffering and trauma" (Stamm, 2010), the negative being compassion fatigue and the positive being compassion satisfaction. Initially created by Charles Figley in the late 1980s (Stamm, 2010) after collaborating with Stamm in 1993 the addition of compassion satisfaction was added to the, and in the late 1900s, the two collaborators renamed the assessment to what it is at the current moment. With thirty questions, the scoring of the assessment is based on three categories; compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. The categories can be represented in connection to one another, for example, high compassion satisfaction with moderate to low burnout and secondary traumatic stress, which is the most positive result (Stamm, 2010b, p. 22). The scores indicate a blend of the three categories. With specific scores, the tool is not a diagnostic tool, similar to the STSAP; however, the scale can "raise issues to address with use of appropriate diagnostic procedures" (Stamm, 2010b, p. 18) for example, the scale can be a guide as people and organizations look to balance both the negative and positive aspects related to jobs and volunteer work.

Although the ProQOL is similar to the STSAP, for this study, the STSAP will be used to measure the experiences of HESA professionals regarding STS. The rationale behind that decision is rooted in the very specific focus of the STSAP in the field rather than ProQOL which is a more general tool and can be used across any profession that may come in contact with traumatic situations.

Predictors of Secondary Traumatic Stress in Student Affairs

A significant thread of recent research has shown that HESA professionals experience STS (Chernoff, 2016; Clark, 2022; Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017). Studies consistently identified five themes thought to be associated with HESA professionals reporting STS: (1) race and gender, (2) education and experience, (3) training and preparation, (4) processing trauma, and (5) job responsibilities impact.

Race and Gender

As race and gender intersect, Clark (2022), made the purpose of his phenomenological dissertation study to explore STS in Black men in HESA, specifically those whose roles entail responding to crises that students may experience. Clark identified his role as the researcher situated in his lived experience as a black man in the field who has worked in functional areas that placed him in student support roles. With 14 participants, Clark's criteria were specific; participants all had to (1) identify as a Black man, (2) have at least one year of experience post an undergraduate degree, (3) be currently employed in a student-facing student affairs position, and finally, (4) meet the threshold of secondary traumatic stress, based on the Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP) (3.0 or higher). Clark anchored his dissertation with these two research questions; "what are the lived experiences of Black male student affairs professionals who have supported students through trauma, and how have these experiences shaped their level of secondary trauma?" (p. 8).

After engaging with the participants, Clark (2022) identified a handful of themes: a lack of training in working with students through trauma (p. 75), a lack of support in managing their emotions after working with students as they navigate traumatic situations

(p. 78), student deaths and suicidal ideation (p. 83), the inability to step away from work after responding to a crisis (p. 87), the negative impacts on participants mental and physical health (p. 89), and facing Black national events while being Black (p. 94). Clark's themes are in alignment with other scholarly work mentioned above; however, the intersection of race and gender created different outcomes of the study based on racialized trauma and gendered trauma. Clark shared practical recommendations for Black men in the field, such as seeking mental health support in the form of counseling, establishing a support network, and identifying and using healthy coping mechanisms. Moreover, Clark identified implications for institutional practice, including ways that the field and supervisors can support the Black men they work with and support by improving the current supervision practices, as well as expanding employee assistance programs (EAPs).

The scholarly work on secondary traumatic stress in Black men in HESA reveals how professionals in helping fields are exposed to STS as an occupational hazard (Clark, 2022). From counselors, social workers, public-school educators, and student affairs professionals, exposure to STS is a common thread that should be explored in more depth to ensure that professionals in helping fields remain well to be productive and make a positive impact. Unlike other scholarly work, Clark's dissertation highlighted ways that race and gender intersecting can create more unique experiences (including STS) for Black men in the field. Clark's study explored the unique experiences that Black men have, particularly as he found that participants have to navigate national racially charged events while being Black, which is increasingly relentless and complex in the current racial climate. Although this study will not be situated on the entire field or a specific

racial/ethnic identity or gender identity, the opportunity to explore why professionals feel called to stay in the field is a valuable conversation to add to prior material on the topic. The benefit of this approach will add to the emerging literature that shows that STS is widespread in HESA and how coping with STS varies across functional areas. It is important to note, that an analysis of HESA professionals' experiences of secondary traumatic stress will not be complete without an analysis of how racism and other intersecting systems of privilege, power, and oppression shape the experience of trauma, professional practice, and secondary traumatic stress.

One theme that Clark (2022) identified from his study was that participants faced racially charged national events while being Black and several participants mentioned how managing this trauma while supporting students was a challenge, "Many of the participants shared that they were unable to fully experience or understand their emotions related to these national headlines because they were so consumed with providing support for their campuses and students" (p. 95). Clark named that this finding was unexpected and his finding aligned with Hodge's (2016) findings about racially/ethnically marginalized men, "African American/Black/Afro Caribbean males showed the highest level of vicarious trauma within the gender identity factor" (p. 76-77). Interestingly, Hodge's (2016) findings showed that female participants showed higher levels of vicarious trauma than men participating in the study. Based on race and gender, those with marginalized identities may be more susceptible to STS or vicarious trauma based on these results.

Education and Experience

Among residence life staff, Hodge (2016) found that participants with additional education, a master's degree or a terminal degree, showed lower levels of vicarious trauma than their peers with a Bachelor's degree. The same result can be highlighted with professionals in housing with more years of experience. Hodge concluded that participants with more education and experience may have more experience to draw from as they manage their well-being while managing STS, and suggested that a longitudinal study could explore how these factors may impact a professional's well-being.

Training and Preparation

Some studies showed that training and preparation can inform how professionals manage STS in the field. Both Lynch (2017) and Clark (2022) identified that this aspect of professionals' experience should be explored further in future research. Lynch (2017) pointed out that professional organizations, and the field as a whole, often perpetuate unhelpful coping mechanisms for professionals who are supporting students (p. 58) by not providing space and time to process traumatic situations, particularly talking about the negative emotions that come with supporting students (p. 73). Similarly, Clark (2022) found that participants themselves called for more training on how to work with students through trauma, particularly emergency response training that should occur throughout the year rather than just at the beginning of the school year.

Processing Trauma

As professionals work with students through traumatic life events, scholars noted how professionals process trauma. Lynch (2017) identified that one theme participants shared was the cumulative nature of providing trauma support. Particularly, they shared

that support for students was regular, even consistent for some. As participants manage the cumulative nature of trauma support, Clark (2022) found that they felt the inability to step away from work responsibilities after responding to a crisis. Participants identified that the culture of their institution and the field pressured them to keep working rather than taking time away to process (Clark, 2022). One specific way to cope with supporting students through traumatic events is a spiritual connection, and Hodge (2016) found that those with a strong spiritual life reported less experience with vicarious trauma than their counterparts.

Job Responsibilities

The work of Chernoff (2016) and Hodge (2016) focused on Conduct Officers and Residence Life Staff, respectively. Chernoff (2016) explored various job responsibilities within conduct work and overall the findings showed that with higher levels of compassion satisfaction (Stamm, 2002) participants showed a decrease in their experiences of secondary traumatic stress. In contrast, participants with a higher level of secondary traumatic stress experienced lower levels of compassion satisfaction. Ultimately Chernoff (2016) showed that with high levels of burnout, participants saw high levels of secondary traumatic stress and suggested that professionals leave the field to preserve their well-being (pp. 123-124). Unlike conduct officers, residence life staff often live on campus and Hodge (2016) found that participants living on campus experienced higher levels of vicarious trauma than their colleagues that lived off campus.

The five themes underlying the experiences of professionals in the field with STS highlight the complexity of navigating secondary traumatic stress as a potential workplace hazard (Chernoff, 2016; Clark 2022’ Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017). However, at

the core of participants' experiences in the various studies is the expectation to support students through traumatic life events, all while managing their own lives outside of work. One point of conversation is measuring exactly what secondary traumatic stress is, a way to quantify the experience. Glass and Lynch (2018) explored just that in their study and creation of the Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP). The following section highlights the origin, details, and how the scale will be used for this study.

Recommendations for Practice

A synthesis across key studies of emerging literature focused on STS in HESA reveals seven themes among the authors' recommendations for future practice. The practical implications identified in this literature cluster around the following themes and common recommendations: (1) person/organizational fit and environments (e.g., Chernoff, 2016), (2) supervision (Chernoff, 2016; Clark, 2022; Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017), (3) support network (Chernoff, 2016; Clark, 2022), (4) seeking counseling (Hodge, 2016; Clark, 2022; Chernoff, 2016), (5) improving training (Chernoff, 2016; Hodge, 2016), (6) graduate and professional preparation (Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022), and (7) professional organizations responsibility (Chernoff, 2016; Lynch, 2017). Although these recommendations have been implemented in institutions only in varying degrees, and have yet to be studied closely, they represent an important contribution to the literature, as institutions and professional organizations work to combat the attrition rates in the field. The recommendations are summarized in the following sections.

Person/Organizational Fit and Environment

Chernoff (2016) identified how person-organization fit can combat experiences of STS, specifically incorporating flexible work schedules and ensuring the job descriptions accurately explain the ways that the role can contribute to STS. Chernoff cites Moos (1987) in defining person-organization fit, "person-organization fit examines at the intersection of personal factors, environmental factors and how the person engages in the environment based on developed coping and adaptation skills" (p. 132). Chernoff (2016) highlighted how flexible work schedules can provide professionals an opportunity to recover after managing crises (p. 135). Moreover, for job descriptions, Chernoff suggested that institutions identify parts of a role that can directly contribute to experiences of burnout and STS (p. 136) rather than relying on "other duties as assigned" as a catch-all for parts of the job that are related to serving in helping capacities (p. 9).

Supervision

Scholars also focused on how supervisory practices can be helpful as professionals manage their well-being while supporting students through a traumatic life event. Chernoff (2016) identified that direct supervision with someone at their institution and support from someone outside of their institution can help professionals establish a support network that helps them process experiences of burnout and/or STS. Hodge (2016) recommended that increased supervision should be established as a means to detect symptoms of vicarious trauma, early and support the professional as early as possible. A potential recommendation that participants showed interest in, was a transparent and supportive supervision experience (p. 98). Lynch (2017) encouraged supervisors and managers to provide professionals time to process their experiences

supporting students through traumatic life events. (p. 98). Finally, Clark (2022) aligned with other studies and recommended that supervisors take ownership of the experience that their direct reports are having as they manage crises "on the front lines" (p. 115), particularly by connecting direct reports to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and increase supervisory support based on the needs of the professional (pp. 116-117). Across all of the literature, supervision is a particularly prevalent theme, specifically, as a way to make meaning of their experiences and find support.

Support Network

As Chernoff (2016) noted with the recommendation of stronger supervision, the network of colleagues acquired would create a support network for professionals so they can openly talk about any issues, pinpoint trends, and share resources on personal and professional development as well as well-being strategies (pp. 133-134). Similarly, Clark (2022) recommended that professionals establish a support network to share experiences, process crises, and debrief national events that can impact personal and professional life (pp. 111-112).

Seeking Counseling

Chernoff (2016) noted that professionals using counseling services could prevent job attrition. Opportunities through EAP programs or other community counseling practices can ensure that professionals explore coping strategies like setting boundaries, for example, to maintain their well-being. On a similar note, Clark (2022) recommended that access and engagement in counseling to support the mental health of professionals would be a space to process the emotionally taxing work, before exhaustion (p. 110). In more depth, Hodge (2016) recommended that self-care techniques should be increased to

maintain a healthy balance of personal and professional life. Some techniques included spirituality along with supporting mental health through counseling (p. 97).

Improving Training

Chernoff (2016) recommended additional training for professionals who support students through traumatic life experiences. The additional training, specifically on the topics of compassion fatigue and prevention, psychological first aid, and crisis response training would hopefully provide professionals with a way to share resources available and support their community of colleagues (p. 136). Additionally, Hodge (2016) focused on training and development as a recommendation to increase training to be more regular and continuous, with some suggested methods being book clubs, webinars, seminars, and attending conferences (p. 96).

Graduate and Professional Preparation

Graduate school programs are often the entry point to working in HESA and Lynch (2017) recommended that graduate programs expose graduate students to the realities of trauma support before they enter into the field professionally. Some specific suggestions were updating the course curriculum or adjusting programs to a social work model (p. 99). Clark (2022) added that graduate and professional preparation should include a more realistic socialization of professionals so that they become more aware of what to expect when working full-time in the field (p. 122).

Professional Organizations' Responsibilities

Chernoff (2016) identified ways that organizations like ACPA and NASPA can establish more depth to their wellness competencies to help professionals to create compassion satisfaction and manage compassion fatigue (pp. 134-135). Lynch (2017)

recommended that national organizations establish more structured engagement opportunities for professionals to develop a skill set to assist them as they manage trauma support and their well-being. Some specific opportunities identified were curriculum for conferences, retreats, and continued education credits.

The recommendations from prior research show how institutions and professional networks can support professionals and graduate students during their careers in the field and before entering the field. The seven common recommendations; person/organizational fit and environments, supervision, support network, seeking counseling, improving training, graduate and professional preparation, and professional organization's responsibility highlight tangible ways that professionals can be supported to maintain their well-being and be retained in the field. This study aims to deepen and add to the recommendations for practice so that institutions can better support the professionals who are walking with students through traumatic life events.

Summary

Although secondary traumatic stress was initially studied only in connection to the helping professions that did not include student affairs, HESA scholars have shown how the framework can be applied to roles that may not have fit into the traditional idea of a helping profession in 1995 (Dickson & Beech, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Hodge, 2017; Chernoff, 2016; Clark, 2022). Themes from current research show how person/organizational fit and environments, supervision, support network, seeking counseling, improving training, graduate and professional preparation, and professional organizations can positively shape student affairs professionals' ability to manage supporting students through traumatic events. Graduate preparation detailed ways that

graduate students’ academic programs can increase the reality of the work as they prepare to serve in full-time roles and support students through traumatic experiences (Lynch, 2017; Lynch & Glass, 2018). Supervision techniques are ways that supervisors are responsible, not alone, but responsible for ensuring that professionals have support as they support students experiencing trauma by allowing time for recovery as professionals to continue supporting students. Department/institution support (Lynch, 2017; Hodge, 2017; Clark, 2022; and Lynch & Glass, 2018): Lynch and Glass (2018) detailed how support for professionals who support students through traumatic events can come from departments, institutions, and even professional organizations. As this literature review has shown, secondary traumatic stress among HESA professionals has not been widely researched, and there is little theory on the specific topic. Nevertheless, applicable research has been developed in related fields, and there is still room for additional research. With the current conversation around the Great Resignation, this study will help fill a gap as the conversation is largely focused on why people leave the field, rather than why professionals stay.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

Constructivist Narrative Inquiry: Overall Approach & Rationale

The methodology guiding this study is a constructivist narrative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The significance of storytelling is rooted in individuals having space to share stories that are uniquely theirs. Structuring a study around participants' storytelling allowed each person the freedom to share their truth. This is a benefit specifically when discussing traumatic moments. Narrative inquiry methodology guides researchers in providing a space for that storytelling. Connelly and Clandinin (1990), for example, referenced a natural human affinity for storytelling as an important reason for recommending narrative inquiry as a social research methodology, "The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 2). Utilizing this framework provided participants the opportunity to share their individual stories, and allow participants to share how their experiences have impacted how they approach student affairs and even how they approach life outside of their respective institutions.

The goal of narrative inquiry is to give power to individuals' stories, an opportunity that is particular to this specific methodology. Gladding and Wallace (2010) introduced four values of storytelling: stories release emotion, stories convey knowledge, stories instill insight and make meaning, and stories help with change and life transitions. The opportunity to honor individuals' stories assures individuals that their stories have meaning, they matter, and they provide knowledge to others, "Individuals can learn from stories regardless of their station in life or circumstances. Stories matter" (p.23). The

interviews provided a meaningful experience for HESA professionals since the topic of secondary stress has not historically included them. I would not consider HESA professionals to be marginalized and silenced; however, they are left out of the research on this topic. Mills & Birks (2014) discuss how narratives give marginalized and silenced voices a space to have their stories heard.

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) clarified that the constructivist paradigm assumes that there are multiple lived realities and that there is space to co-create these between participant and researcher (p. 27). To understand the experiences of higher education professionals when they are supporting traumatized students, I believe it is critical to reconstructing the reality of the emotional responses. By reconstructing their meaning-making, professionals can reflect on the waves of emotions, behaviors, and the possible reoccurring waves that stem from their student-facing work. Constructivist narrative inquiry methods allowed me, and readers of this material, to build a level of understanding of participants' experiences.

Narrative inquiry is not meant to merely regurgitate individual stories. Instead, narrative inquiry is focused on the goal of analyzing and understanding discourse, "Narrative inquiry is more than the uncritical gathering of stories. Narrative inquirers strive to attend to how a story is constructed, for whom and why, as well as the cultural discourses that it draws upon" (Traher, para. 1, 2009). Sharing stories is the method that gets to the goal, which is to be in dialogue with others, that is where the power resides. Storytelling is one practice where individuals have space to determine what they believe is reality and what they consider truth. I find this practice to be extremely powerful, as a group of individuals could all live through the same experience but make meaning of it

differently than one another. Lawrence et al., (2006), added to this idea by honoring that storytelling often facilitated continued dialogue and exploration, “Stories provide us with an authentic means for honoring the voices of our research participants and presenting these voices in a way that connects with our audience, inviting further dialogue and exploration” (p. 5). This study adds to the current research and creates a space for further exploration. I believe stories are powerful and this study provides a space for individuals to be heard and to contribute to a body of work that can potentially add to the current research on this topic.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- What experiences can HESA professionals recall that resulted in their Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP) reaching a significance of STS?
- Based on perceptions, what institution-provided resources and/or opportunities do participants describe as support for the participant to be retained?
- How do HESA professionals explain their decision to remain in student affairs?

Commonplaces of Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin et al., (2007) presented three commonplaces of narrative inquiry, temporality, sociality, and place as a way to explore narrative inquiry as a methodology. Commonplace one, temporality, highlights that people will always have three realities; past, present, and future. As a researcher, specifically talking to participants about how they have supported students through traumatic life events and why they have stayed in the field, it will be crucial to work towards understanding how each participant has evolved throughout their life transitions. It is unrealistic for me, as a researcher, to

assume that participants have no past, present, or future trauma that influences who they are as people. Commonplace two, sociality, is situated between the researcher (the inquirer) and the participant. Essentially, as the researcher, I am "in an inquiry relationship" (p. 23) with participants. In practice, as a researcher, I occupy a place of inquiry, not truly walking alongside each participant as a partner, but walking alongside each participant to seek truth and explore lived experiences. For example, I inserted timely probing questions to fully capture each response rather than just showing non-verbal affirmations. Participants recounted situations that aligned with my lived experience, for example and it was important for me, as an inquirer, not to unnecessarily derail the conversation to a common ground. Rather my goal was to explore each participant's lived experiences without stepping outside of that realm of memory. For example, a participant has helped several students who have managed deaths in their families and it was important that I assisted them in creating a vivid picture of those experiences rather than remaining surface level. Commonplace three, place, zooms in on the grounding and significance of location in participants' narratives. Specifying place, particularly, as temporality shifts, was an effective way to ensure that each participant's narrative was not impacted by me as the researcher. Clandinin et al., (2007) specify that the specific location is crucial (p. 23) for both the inquiry and where events have taken place. As a researcher, it was my responsibility to manage the place of the interview, virtually, and honor the experiences of each participant. In general, commonplaces of narrative inquiry created an environment that was rooted in the fullness of the participant's past, present, and future, my role as a researcher, as an inquirer, and the place where the inquiry is taking place. Ultimately, the commonplaces serve as a way to

create safety for participants and ensure that each participant is situated as a key part of the process and me, as a researcher, am only serving as an inquirer.

Site and Participants

For this study, the site varies based on where each participant is currently working and participants vary based on functional areas. With 12 to 15 interviews and 4 to 5 participants per functional area, the interviews covered a range of institutional types and experiences. Participants were recruited via social media, specifically my personal social media accounts along with several Facebook Groups: e.g., Alpha Kappa Alpha Student Affairs Professionals (SA Pros), Ohio University College Student Personnel Alumni Connection, (BLKSAP) Black Student Affairs Professionals, Pan African Network of ACPA, Student Affairs and Higher Education Professionals, PhinisheD/FinishEdD (Drs/Future Drs) #WhoGotNext, and Women Doctoral Support Group. The rationale behind choosing these social media groups is rooted in the community standards in each group that welcome and support calls for participants for various research opportunities. Table 2 shows how many members are in each group and the mission of each group.

Table 2. Social Media Groups Information

Social Media Group	Current Membership	About the Group
Alpha Kappa Alpha Student Affairs Professionals (SA Pros)	367 members	Women of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated whose passion is Mentoring and Training Tomorrow’s Leaders!
Ohio University College Student Personnel Alumni Connection	1,200 members	Ohio University College Student Personnel Alumni Connection is a networking tool for past and present OU CSP students.

		Our hope is to cultivate connections and conversations. We also hope to keep alumni connected to the current happenings of OU CSP.
(BLKSAP) Black Student Affairs Professionals	13,000 members	#blksap is simply a group of people who share a common goal: to uplift and support Black Student Affairs professionals. This group is for those who work or aspire to work in Higher Ed/Student Affairs who identify as a part of the Black Diaspora or a person of color.
Pan African Network of ACPA	1,400 members	The Pan African Network (PAN) is one of four networks within the Coalition for Multicultural Affairs (CMA) of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). CMA serves as a liaison to ACPA's leadership, focusing attention on issues in education and trends, which affect students and professionals of color in the College Student Personnel field. The Mission of PAN is to provide programs and services geared toward the need of Pan African members within ACPA. PAN strives to serve its purpose through our Core Values i.e., Educational Leadership, Collaboration, Fellowship, Advocacy, Professional Development, and Mentoring.
Student Affairs and Higher Education Professionals	38,000 members	Welcome to the Student Affairs and Higher Education Professionals (formerly SAPros and now SAHEPros)! This is a

		space where professionals share, learn, grow, and laugh together. We encourage our members to be authentic when sharing their thoughts, experiences, and ideas. While holding those things to be true, we also acknowledge that this is a group where you might engage in critical dialogue or have your opinions challenged. That may not always be comfortable, but we ask you to lean into that discomfort! This group is a community of student affairs and higher education professionals with diverse backgrounds, identities, experiences, and situations.
PhinisheD/FinishEdD (Drs/Future Drs) #WhoGotNext	23,500 members	A global collective and resource/motivation page for all current & future doctors (research, medical, law, professional etc.)
Women Doctoral Student Support	1,400 members	This is a group for women who are in various doctoral programs and majors in the US and internationally in an effort to provide support for each other in this process. This group is not affiliated with any particular organization, university, business, or group. We are here to help.

As discussed in Chapter Two, prior research on secondary traumatic stress (STS) has been focused on four fields of study; counselors (Pinto, 2001), social workers (Bride, 2007), public school educators (Caringi, 2015), and student affairs professionals (Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022). Within student affairs research, functional areas such as conduct officers (Chernoff, 2016) and housing professionals (Hodge, 2016) have been the primary

focus. The fields of study and data sources used in past literature underscore a need to study various functional areas that have been relatively under-researched. This study is focused on three focus areas that have not yet been explored in student affairs research on STS: cultural center staff, student organization advisors, and academic advisors. The rationale behind this selection comes from The Chronicle of Higher Education Trends Reports that they publish every year to identify a handful of trends in the field that impact higher education and over several years these three areas have seen a shift in what is expected of them and the trauma support that they are extending to students.

Cultural centers staff have had to pivot to be more supportive of the racial trauma that students are experiencing and, in the article, "The Antiracist College" the concept of antiracism was highlighted as institutions were working to counter the racial violence after the world saw the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Bartlett, 2021). Institutions worked to ensure that their campuses pivoted practices to create antiracist institutions. Although historian, Ibram X. Kendi, did not invent the concept, Kendi's work grounded institutions as they made plans to change how their institutions do their work. Most of that labor was placed on the shoulders of cultural centers, centers that most commonly have a staff made up of people of color. People of color who are managing their trauma while helping students make sense of their lived experiences based on their racial and/or ethnic identities.

Student organization advisors have to mitigate potential harm that students experience in organizations and manage students' families' concerns. The article "Spotlight on Hazing" (Hoover, 2015) and the article "The New 'In Loco Parentis'" (Patel, 2019) both articles named the impact of hazing on college campuses. This

dissertation focused on student life advisors and one example of that functional area is Greek Life advising. With Greek Life being under a microscope after deaths such as Timothy Piazza's death in 2017 their advisors in student life are now tasked with not just overseeing individual chapter's development but also serving as a resource to each member to ensure they are all following safe practices and not crossing the line into hazing territory, leaving the chapter, the organization, and the institution potentially liable. In the article, the author names that institutions are either all in or all out when it comes to maintaining Greek Life and that advisors may have to exercise a "more-intrusive advising" practice (Patel, 2019, para. 27).

Finally, academic advisors are doing much more than giving students their class schedules. Hoover (2015) wrote about the changing duties in "Spotlight on Retention" by highlighting how the role of Academic Advisors is drastically changing to require the use of counseling techniques with students because academic success isn't just about fun classes and learning study skills. The article outlined examples from Trine University and Middle Tennessee University, including their use of early alert systems. Trine started a mentoring program for students with academic or financial struggles that can impact retention and Middle Tennessee University shifted away from old-school advising and embraced a new-school advising approach, which uses predictive analytics to target struggling students. As demonstrated in these examples, t academic advisors are now doing more than giving students a list of courses to take. Expectations have shifted and academic advisors are increasingly responsible for out-of-the-classroom support. This, in turn, can entail supporting students through traumatic experiences, such as a shortage in financial support that may result in the student dropping out.

The Chronicle of Higher Education Trends Reports spotlights the everchanging roles of professionals in cultural centers, student organization advisors, and academic advisors. Professionals in these functional areas have not been studied, in this manner, before and this study was a chance to dig deeper into how secondary traumatic stress has impacted professionals in those functional areas.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study was submitted for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure that participants' rights and welfare are protected. All participants reviewed an Invitation to Participate ensuring that they knew the boundaries of the study and how they would be protected. Before starting the individual interviews, participants were allowed to ask any questions to ensure that they felt comfortable and supported throughout the process. Recognizing that participants are working at institutions across the country, pseudonyms were created for each participant to ensure confidentiality. And, knowing that the field is small, institutional details and department details were removed, unless critical to the narrative, and if critical, names and descriptions were edited slightly to ensure that participants cannot be identified. Additionally, based on the conversation, participants' well-being was kept in mind and post-interview questions were introduced along with a follow-up email ensuring that the participants were doing well in the immediate and long term from their engagement with the study.

Access, Role, Reciprocity, Trust, and Rapport

From the time I started my journey in the field, I have been active in various virtual communities either on the GroupMe app or on Facebook. These virtual communities provide professionals with a way to connect more regularly without having

to be in person at the same institution or an annual conference. Some virtual communities are specific to a functional area (e.g., housing, conduct, fraternity and sorority life), whereas others, like the Student Affairs Professionals Facebook Group, are open to any functional area. As a member of the Student Affairs Professionals Facebook Group, I have direct access to professionals who work in higher education, specifically in student affairs.

Even though participants may have a shared professional experience, individually, they are experiencing their personal and professional lives in unique ways based on how they identify (social identities such as race, gender, age, cultural background, etc.). Similarly, as the researcher in this study, I have my own intersectional social identities and experiences. It is important, therefore, for me to develop researcher reflexivity in the research process. Reflexivity is an active process of developing and using a practice of reflection to analyze and understand my positionality, presence, and subjective experiences in the course of engaging with participants and conducting the study (Mills & Birks, 2018, p. 25). In practice, I keep a reflective journal to document my actions and feelings that could impact how I see participants and their narratives. Specifically, I used the reflexive journal after each interview to sit with any experiences that stimulate an emotional response from my participants or me.

There is a level of reciprocity as I affirm a participant's experiences as they share their lived experiences with me and to affirm experiences, trust, and rapport has to be built. For example, participants shared their narratives with me and to practice care for participants, I affirmed them by actively listening, checking in to ensure I fully understood what they have shared, and not discrediting their lived experiences. Sharing

stories related to trauma can be a very vulnerable experience and affirming lived experiences is a meaningful practice to create space for the experience without judgment. To build trust and rapport with each participant, I spent a period grounding in as a means to establish a foundation before introducing the interview questions that could bring up difficult emotions. Grounding in included some small talk such as why the participant decided to participate in the study, how they got to where they are in their professional career, and what they do to maintain their well-being. In my professional career, this grounding in time can be called a wellness check which I put into practice when meeting with students in times of crisis. The wellness check is intended to establish a safe foundation for a conversation that may stimulate an emotional response and require vulnerability.

Role of the Researcher

This topic is important to me as a researcher which means I live within the research, just as Mills and Birks (2014) suggest. As a researcher, I am situated in this research as a HESA professional who has supported students through traumatic life experiences. My first and only job in college was serving as a Resident Assistant. The day I signed my contract there was a fire in the building I was going to be working in. A student had a pet iguana, which was not an approved pet, and the heat lamp was too close to the clothes in the student’s closet which created a fire. I should have known then that working with students would be messy and traumatic. After graduate school and working in Housing and Residence Life professionally for eight years, I have found that there is a need for HESA professionals to have space to be heard when work gets messy and traumatic.

As a researcher, my role was to create an environment where participants feel safe and supported enough to access their thoughts and feelings. One important tool that was used to ensure that my own lived experiences are not overpowering the narratives of participants is reflective journaling. Reflective journaling is a strategy that serves a dual purpose; to enable reflexivity and to serve as a self-care tool. Ortlipp (2008) highlighted that journaling can ensure reflexivity, methodologically speaking, by creating space to challenge any assumptions and explain any personal beliefs (p. 695) that can impact the study. Additionally, as a way to ensure my self-care while walking participants through traumatic experiences that they supported students through, reflective journaling provided an opportunity for me to make sure I take care of myself as I listened to participants' narratives that may be difficult to take in. On a personal level, journaling has been a helpful tool in the past as I have navigated trauma, such as supporting students in Housing and Residence Life and living through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical and Political Considerations

I did not assume that my participants entered their current role with no pre-existing stress that could impact how they experience secondary traumatic stress (STS) in their current role. I did not want to cause harm by asking questions that could be experienced as triggers. To ensure that interview questions do not trigger participants, I asked participants to clearly articulate if/when a question caused any distress and checked in throughout the interview to make sure each participant has ample breaks if needed. Politically, I was mindful of the narratives that revealed how institutions and/or departments vary in their support of staff who are experiencing STS. I took specific steps, pseudonyms, and altering institutional or department-specific material, to ensure that

demographic information was kept confidential so that participants were protected from being identified either directly or indirectly. Although the interviews were recorded, only my dissertation chair and I have access to the recordings. Recordings and deidentified transcripts were kept in a secure place, as stated in the invitation to participate in research. No individual or institutional names were used in analyses or reports.

Data Collection Methods

Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale

Before the interview phase of the study, each potential participant took the Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP). The Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP) was created by Glass and Lynch (2018). Glass and Lynch created the scale to understand STS in student affairs professionals, specifically the instrument was intended to quantify symptoms of STS. With 617 participants, they used a three-phase approach to piloting the study including item development and expert review. They referenced the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Health Disorders (2013), the Secondary Trauma Self-Efficacy Scale (Bride, 2004), and narratives from student affairs professionals who experienced trauma. The expert review was facilitated by nine professionals who reviewed the scale for its content validity. The panelists had a wealth of professional experiences, “licensed counselors working in a university setting, mid-and senior-level student affairs professionals working in various functional areas, executive leaders in student affairs professional organizations, and faculty experts in instruction development” (p. 5).

Glass and Lynch (2018) pinpointed three implications of their study as they piloted the scale; the tool can be used to gain more insight to help understand how supporting students has impacted student affairs professionals, the instrument has the potential to be a helpful tool for supervisors to ensure that their direct reports are supported, and finally, programs suited for graduate students can use the instrument to create space for inter-group processing as graduate students experience supporting students through traumatic events. The scholars concluded by noting what the scale is for and what it is not for the scholars clearly stated that the scale is not intended for diagnostic purposes (p.16).

By using the STSAP, I knew that every participant has had, up until being interviewed, various lived experiences that have created secondary trauma (with a score of 3.0 or higher on the tool) therefore they were able to identify how they have been supported as they continue working in student affairs. I received permission to use the instrument from Dr. Jason Lynch and distributed the instrument to potential participants via the call for participants. After the completion of the STSAP, potential interview participants were identified, based on whether their responses resulted in a score of 3.0 or higher, indicating an experience of secondary traumatic stress.

The survey was administered via Qualtrics and was not be adapted, it was used as it was created. Once participants were identified, based on STSAP score and functional area, they received an email from me directing them to schedule their one-hour virtual interview. The identifiable data, email addresses, and names were included initially but later removed and replaced with a pseudonym to ensure that participants remain anonymous throughout the study. Once a participant's survey results indicate that they

did not meet the criteria, they were emailed a notification updating them that they would not be engaging in the study. Similarly, once a participant's survey results indicate that they were a viable candidate for the study, they were emailed to schedule their Zoom interview.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants engaged in 60 to 90-minute Zoom interviews and I used a semi-structured interview protocol that included demographic questions such as; years in the field, current functional area, and institutional affiliation. Interviews were facilitated via Zoom and were recorded through Zoom as well. The Zoom transcription feature was used along with TEMI coding website, and I cleaned up the transcription by replaying the recorded interview to capture the conversation in full. With fifteen interviews and five participants per functional area, the interviews covered a range of institutional types and experiences. The interview questions are as follows:

1. What experiences can you recall that may have led to you experiencing secondary traumatic stress?
    a. To ensure that participants had time to process their response to this question, prior to discussing it in the interview, the participant and the researcher engaged in a focused freewrite exercise for five minutes to identify what those experiences were prior to moving forward with the rest of the interview. Stevens and Cooper (2009) define a focused freewrite as an opportunity to write for a specific time based on a focused theme or key question (p. 233).

2. Walk me through…[specific incident that the participant shares from the activity in Question One].
3. Talk to me about how your thinking and your coping skills have changed over time as you continue to support students through traumatic life events.
4. What, if any, institutionally provided resources have you engaged with that have directly connected to your retention in higher education student affairs?
5. As a current professional in higher education student affairs, what would you say has kept you doing this work?

Before engaging with the interview questions, I spent time grounding in with each participant. Grounding in included some small talk such as why the participant decided to participate in the study, how they got to where they are in their professional career, and what they do to maintain their well-being. To provide flexibility, I adhered to a semi-structured form of interviewing that aligns with Brinkmann (2018). Methodologically, semi-structured interviews create some consistency while also allowing flexibility to adjust and respond to information that each participant may share during their interview and interviews were coded and can be compared in the analysis stage (Mills & Birks, 2014). Rather than formally approaching interviews, I used language such as a "focused conversation" (Mills & Birks, p. 189) that ensured that the space was welcoming, relaxed, and safe. Mills and Birks note further that this kind of approach creates "optimized data quality" (p. 189). To do this well, I drew on counseling techniques that I have been applying since the beginning of my graduate career. Specifically, I used active listening, mirroring language ensuring that I understood the stories being shared, and silence to create time for participants to reflect and break the silence when they have

more information to share (Brinkmann, 2022, p.67). To honor the conversation and not hold tightly to the structured interview questions, a semi-structured form was the best option for engaging in meaningful conversation and allowing participants the space to guide the conversation.

As described above, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to create space for participants to share complex and nuanced thoughts (Bearman, 2019). For example, one research question is what experiences can student affairs professionals recall that resulted in their Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP) reaching a significance of STS. One way to explore this in interviews was to ask participants, to tell me about a time when they supported a student through a traumatic life event, what was going on during the semester, and what was your relationship with the student before supporting them in that specific moment, etc. Those quotes from participants were an additional strategy used after interviews to organize findings based on the themes that emerged from participants' interviews.

This method, semi-structured interviews, allowed me to transport myself and my participant into a situation or interaction with a student(s). In practice, I asked probing questions of each participant to add layers to their storytelling, for example, what year was the student, how did you come to know them, how often were interactions with that student, etc. These layers added to each situation so I could walk through the situation with the participant to fully understand and experience their reality. When asking participants to share experiences supporting students through traumatic life events, it's important as a researcher that I walked through that experience, right beside them. This

exercise positioned me in my constructivist framework as an active participant in my research rather than a spectator.

Reflexivity is important to this study because it served as an active process of developing and using a practice of reflection to analyze and understand my positionality, presence, and subjective experiences in the course of engaging with participants and conducting this study (Mills & Birks, 2014, p. 25). In practice, I kept a reflective journal to document my actions and feelings that could impact how I saw participants and their narratives. Specifically, I used the reflexive journal after each interview to sit with any experiences that stimulate an emotional response from my participants or me. Outside of reflective journaling, I used member checking, participants were sent their transcription as a way to clarify any parts of their interview to ensure that their narrative is accurate based on their lived experiences. Commonplace (Clandinin et al., 2007) was useful while conducting interviews ensuring that participants were given space to be their fullest selves, past, present, and future, and the place, virtually, is an environment that provides safety for each participant.

Data Analysis Procedures

Narrative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) is the method I used to analyze the interview material for this study, and based on the transcription of the interviews, I explored open coding aligned with the Saldaña (2015) method, specifically descriptive coding and process coding to identify the similarities and differences from the participant’s experiences supporting students through traumatic life experiences. After each interview, I noted in a research memo any key points to go back to during transcription to clarify. I used *Atlas.ti* qualitative data analysis software to organize and

document my analyses. I completed iterative rounds of descriptive and focused coding as described by Saldaña (2015). By using rounds of descriptive and focused coding, I was able to tease out details that may not be obvious in the initial coding process.

In the later stages of data analysis, I incorporated practices based on Saldaña's recommendations (2015). Additionally, relying on the context of the situation, that the participant shared, and the way the participant told their story by paying close attention to their body language and the words they choose may provide additional clarity. Commonplace (Clandinin et al., 2007) was useful during the data analysis process since I established an inquiry relationship (p. 23) with each participant and that was useful during the coding process, pulling out participant's themes, similarities, and unique differences.

Procedures to Address Trustworthiness and Credibility

I used several methods to support trustworthiness and credibility in this study. I am positioned within the research and I believe it is important to lean on my professional experiences of prolonged engagement, researcher reflexivity, and the use of thick description in particular as methods to establish credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Dennis, 2014). I have served as a professional in higher education student affairs in various roles at three institutions for ten years, and with each experience, I have supported students through traumatic lived experiences. Through these experiences, I have established prolonged engagement in the practical contexts that HESA professionals inhabit. As a way to make sure that my lived experiences did not bleed into the experiences of participants, I incorporated member checking. Specifically, I sent completed transcriptions to all participants and asked for their comments on specific

findings and analyses based on their narratives. Gathering participants' feedback, comments, and edits further enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings (Thomas, 2017). It was important to hear from participants since the interviews were virtual and in a virtual conversation, I remained open to possibly misinterpreting body language.

The difficulty in reading body language due to the virtual nature of the interviews introduced some challenges and limitations in terms of the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. To the extent it was possible, I gathered information that was based on the change in emotions or behaviors that participants may show or share while recounting their experiences. As one strategy for navigating this issue, I asked participants to "walk through" an experience supporting a student or students through traumatic life experiences, recounting what happened step-by-step. This interviewing strategy elicited what methodologists' term 'thick description.' Thick, rich descriptions, or "deep, dense, detailed accounts" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128), further supported the credibility and the transferability of this research. Thick descriptions allowed me to reconstruct participants' narratives with vivid detail, rather than glossing over career highlights as related to my purpose of the study. Incorporating a thick description also enhanced and supported the transferability of findings from the study. That transferability was valuable as the conversation around STS in the field continues. Before interviews, each participant had a well-informed self-described profile established including their age, racial and ethnic identities, and any additional social characteristics that can shape or contextualize how trauma shows up for them (e.g., being an introvert or an extrovert, internal or

external processor) (Polit & Beck, 2010) and this was done in the grounding in portion of each interview.

Summary

With the impact of The Great Resignation, HESA professionals are in a position to stay in the field or move into other sectors that may provide more financial support, flexibility, and supports for professionals' well-being. In this study, participants were invited to share their narratives of managing STS, naming what has kept them in the field, and specifically their rationale for staying rather than moving into another industry. Constructivist narrative inquiry set the foundation for me to reconstruct participants' narratives and ensure that their experiences were heard, validated, and honored.

Constructivist narrative inquiry guided my research methods and allowed me to reconstruct my participants' realities (Mills & Birks, 2014) and through shared narratives (Shay, 1994). I reconstructed, analyzed, and interrogated the meanings that participants assign to their experiences supporting students through traumatic life events. As a qualitative researcher, I used multiple participants' stories together, to understand their multifaceted experience, and, as Denzin and Lincoln (2013) describe it, "weave a complex text about race, identity, nation, class, sexuality, intimacy, and family" (p. 9). Personal experience is complexly rooted in how people identify. Supported by narrative inquiry methods, and remaining mindful and alert to these intersections, I conducted a study in which participants were seen, understood, and affirmed in their fullness.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Previous chapters discussed the current climate of retention in higher education student affairs and the potential occupational hazard of the work based on the impact of secondary traumatic stress. Figley (1995) defined the phenomenon, secondary traumatic stress, as "the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other–the stress of wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (p. 7). The use of constructivist narrative inquiry allows space to understand the experiences and attributions HESA professionals share regarding their decisions to remain in the field, even after supporting students through traumatic events. As discussed in Chapter 2, prior research on secondary traumatic stress (STS) has been focused on four fields of study; counselors (Pinto, 2001), social workers (Bride, 2007), public school educators (Caringi, 2015), and student affairs professionals (Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022). Within student affairs research, functional areas such as conduct officers (Chernoff, 2016) and housing professionals (Hodge, 2016) have been the primary focus. The fields of study and data sources used in past literature underscore a need to study various functional areas that have been relatively under-researched. The proposed study is focused on three focus areas that have not yet been explored in student affairs research on STS: cultural centers, student life, and academic support.

In this chapter, the results of this study are presented. I used Saldaña's (2015) coding method to guide my analyses and to identify themes relevant to the research questions: What experiences do participants recount as leading to their secondary traumatic stress? What resources and/or opportunities do participants identify (potentially

provided by supervisor(s), departments, institutions, professional organizations, etc.) for them to be retained in the field? How do participants describe their reasoning in deciding to remain in student affairs?

Participants

To understand the results of the study, it is critical to first understand who the participants are who gave of their time to share their experiences. In total, there were 15 participants, all representing various institutions, lived experiences, and identities. Table 3 outlines the information for each participant; name, response to the grounding in question, "How do you describe yourself," how do you describe yourself, years of experience, and functional area. Participants shared what was most salient to them, during the interviews, when responding to the grounding in question, "How do you describe yourself" and it is significant to note that those who are radicalized as white can think and talk in color blind terms and by doing so, center whiteness.

Table 3. Participants Information

Participant's Name	Self-Description	Years of Experience
Functional Area: Cultural Center		
Dr. Marge (she/her)	I am a Queer, cis[gender], White, fat, woman, who is Ph.D. educated, and from the Midwest, and is a leftist, and a survivor.	20 years
Jameson (he/him)	I describe myself as a Black man, as a family member, as	5 years

	someone passionate about the work of justice and liberation.	
Natasha (she/her)	I am a White woman who grew up in the Midwest. I grew up in an education family and I am 30 that feels like, you know, major identity right now. I am goofy and passionate about education, learning, identity, and liberation. I am also a bit of a nerd. I like books and Marvel. I'm culturally Catholic.	4 years
Rayn (she/they)	queer both in gender and sexuality wise, mixed race Philippinx American	3 years
Simone (she/her)	I'm a Black woman who happens to always be angry. Anger is, I'm angry at the status of what's happening to Black people and I use that anger as a fuel for my social justice. Umm, caregiver, educator, advocate.	5 years

Functional Area: Student Organization Advising		
Alan (he/him)	I am a first-generation mid-westerner, first generation high school graduate, college graduate, master's and eventually a PhD graduate. From the Midwest originally, mid Westerner I identify as gay or queer. Grew up and a lower socioeconomic status I would say in a rural community.	22 years
Ally (she/her)	I am in my late twenties. White woman working in higher education.	6 years
Ben (he/him)	I would describe myself as an introverted individual. I grew up in a very, very small town. But being a part of higher education, I've started when I was real closed-minded back in my small little town. But growing up, getting an education and going	9 years

	into higher education has really expanded my horizons as well as my ability to be open-minded and understanding of others.	
Brittany (she/her)	I am a Black woman who lives in the Midwest now	6 years
Imani (she/her)	I would describe myself as a 35-year-old Black Christian woman who identifies as a wife, mom, sister, friend.	10 years
Functional Area: Academic Advising		
Claire (she/her)	I'm from the Midwest. I think that is just like helpful in knowing background and I went to graduate school in the Southeast, so, also kind of plays a role in what I do. I really love being outside in nature and just like recreating, individually or with others, and I'm kind of obsessed with my dog.	9 years

Delaney (she/her)	I am White, female. But cis[gender] lesbian. That queerness absolutely contributes to all of this.	11 years
Laura (she/her)	I would describe myself as someone who enjoys a lot of me time. I'm an introvert for sure. Some words I think that would describe me would be, you know, positive, upbeat faith is really important to me and my friends and my family are really important to me as well. And my dog!	6 years
Maddie (she/her)	So, I am a White cis[gender] straight woman and I actually through- I think my experiences in higher education, have discovered that I have some mental illnesses that I deal with. But I'm affected by depression and generalized anxiety and	6 years

	yeah, still learning what that kind of means to me. I'm about to turn 30 so I think sometimes people call me like the baby of the office. Came from kinda like middle class to upper middle-class family, so, I have some financial privilege there.	
Zenni (she/her)	I am a Latina female, and I am also a mother of 3 and a cancer survivor.	14 years

Among the participants there were five professionals who included White racial/ethnic identities in their self-description and three who presented as White but did not explicitly identify themselves that way within their self-description. Four women and one man identified as Black, with one woman sharing her race/ethnicity later in her interview. Rayn (she/they) identified as a Philippinx American and Zenni included her Latina identity in her self-description. Eleven participants used she/her pronouns, three used he/him pronouns, and one used she/they pronouns. Four participants' self-descriptions included identities that fall within the LGBTQ+ community. A range of experiences were included in terms of time in the field; about four were early in their career (5 years or less), seven reported being mid-level professionals (6-10 years), and four participants reported more than 10 years of experience ranging from 11 to 22 years.

Incidents Recounted by Participants

Throughout each interview, participants shared a range of life events that they had supported students through during their current roles and throughout their graduate and professional careers. Table 4 provides a summary of the specific types of incidents that participants shared along with how frequently each type of incident was shared across the interviews. The incidents in the table are specific categories of incidents that participants mentioned more than once throughout all 15 interviews. Appendix A lists the full list of incidents, including those that were mentioned once.

Table 4. Specific Incidents Shared by Participants More Than Once

Type of Incident	Number of Times Mentioned Throughout the Interviews
sexual assault	7
mental health struggles	5
suicidal ideation	4
effects of COVID	3
financial instability	3
reactions to current events	3
student death	3
academically struggling	2
food insecurity	2
sexual misconduct	2

suicide completion	2

Throughout each interview, participants were generous, insightful, and vulnerable in sharing their narratives. Based on the methodological approach, below I have highlighted a few narratives in greater detail. A few specific narratives that sat with me, long after the interview concluded based on the participants reaction to sharing their experiences or my reaction to their experiences. The three narratives below discuss death and sexual assault; two topics that are not uncommon for HESA professionals to support a student or a community of students through.

Natasha, who served in a multicultural center with four years of experience, was a chaperone to a funeral of a student who died:

> So, this [was] a student within our community passing away in a very public space. And because like, it just really like rocked everybody. And even if you weren't close, you realize how close you were to him and the influence that he had on the community. And so, that was just, I mean, it was beautiful in a sense of that community healing and grieving together. But . . . it was one of those things where like the way I grieve might be different, but the way I needed to support students was to show up for them rather than maybe taking that time that I needed to rest.

Natasha's grief had to be compartmentalized for the sake of her students. During the interview, she often paused while describing this experience. She identified that she needed rest and rest was not within her grasp as she journeyed with students to and from the funeral, a 24-hour bus ride, she clarified. Her primary focus during the journey was

finding balance in how she navigated the situation while supporting students in the same moment. Prior to transition to the next interview question, Natasha shared that she was thankful that she did it; but, “it was a lot.” Natasha, a white woman working in a cultural center may have more reflexivity due to the intersection of her race and the racial demographics of the students she served.

Alan, a student organization advisor with twenty-two years of experience, shared how he responded to a drug overdose, that occurred several years ago, and the fraternity house scene was puzzling to him, specifically how there was blood in places that did not make sense to him. It was clear that the sight of all the blood and the visible evidence of the distress and panic might be what was so disturbing to Alan:

> For whatever reason, I think . . . a student was having like a friend stay over and we believe that the, the member had an overdose or started like convulsing or something happened . . . while they were sleeping. And apparently there had maybe been an incident earlier in the evening where there was maybe a fight or an altercation, somewhere else with the person. And then the friend was trying to wake up the person and must have gotten like fluid and blood and stuff all over them. And then, seeing that something had happened, started being really concerned and trying to get help. So, they kind of went everywhere in the house knocking on doors and just kind of like going everywhere in the house. And there's just blood every, like, everywhere in the house. Like streaks on the walls, all over people's doors, all, just all over the place.

Unlike Natasha, Alan’s experience that he shared was primarily fixated on unknowns. During his interview, Alan vividly recalled the scene and the outstanding

questions that he was wrestling with because things “were not making sense.” He repeatedly recalled how much blood he saw and names that it was odd from his perspective, based on what allegedly occurred. Many times, HESA professionals don’t know what happened in a situation, which leaves those professionals in a space where they are trying to put the pieces together on their own.

Finally, Delaney, who served in academic advising, with eleven years of experience, recounted her first major crisis to manage as a new professional, which was to tell a student she had to leave school after allegedly spreading a sexually transmitted infection (STI) after being raped. Fortunately, Delany’s supervisor intercepted that assignment; but, her memory of the request and the impact was still fresh:

> And kicking this student out for spreading an STD. And the student spread an STD in a 4-legged shower and the only reason we knew the student had an STD is because the student had been gang raped in the residence hall a couple of weeks earlier. And I was at a Catholic institution, and I had been given a credit card by our Dean of Students to go get this kid Plan B, if this kid couldn't afford a Plan B on their own.

Unlike Alan, Delaney’s questions were less focused on the specific situation; but, the way the situation was being managed. During the interview, Delaney could see in my face just how horrifying I felt the situation had to be for the student, for her, and the other parties involved, so much so that she apologized to me saying, “I’m sorry, there-that was a lot.” The student that Delaney was supposed to deliver the news to was a student she met during the first week of school. The student, a Black woman, was assigned a White woman as a roommate; but, the White roommate did not want to live with her because of

her race. Delaney recalled that her assumption was that because she had a positive relationship with the student, that was why she was tasked with delivering the news, which I named was an "abuse of her connection" since that was the expectation of Delaney. She concluded that for this situation, that the student was unfortunately the most harmed by the university. Delaney visibly looked disappointed that the university put the student in a position that was disrespectful, emotionally, without thinking about how the student would receive the news, given the circumstances. At the core of her sharing this experience, the student's experience with the university was her primary concern.

Participants shared a wealth of experiences and by highlighting a few, it is clear that the occupational hazard of secondary traumatic stress can be identified in HESA professionals. Natasha highlighted her reality of managing her own grief and the grief of her students. Alan spoke about a scene that was not adding up and the disturbing experience trying to put the puzzle pieces together as a student overdosed. Delaney recalled supporting a student amidst a top down leadership decision while trying to put the primary focus on the student's experience. The shared experiences and specific narratives revealed a handful of themes that will be analyzed.

Analysis of Themes

Throughout the interviews, participants shared powerful narratives, and recounted a wealth of experiences. In the course of thematic and narrative analyses, I identified five themes for further discussion here: (1) vocational alignment in the field, (2) heroism/savior complex, (3) importance of mental health as coping skills evolve, (4) the significance of professional relationships & community, and (5) a mixed review of institutional resources. As I describe each theme in the following sections, participant

narratives will add depth to the discussion and highlight the lived experiences from professionals in higher education student affairs.

Vocational Alignment in the Field

The American Psychology Association defines vocation as "an occupation or profession to which one is particularly suited, especially one involving a sense of mission or calling" (American Psychological Association). A prevalent thread shared by participants was how the work that they did at their respective institutions was more than a job, it was far greater than them. Dr. Marge who served as a director of a cultural center, specifically a center focused on gender and sexuality, with twenty years of experience spoke about how the work was bigger than her and is for a greater good:

> And I, you know, I stay in it because I, I believe in what we do. And it's like, I'm, I'm gonna be here till they drive me out here. Because it's important and, and a, a climate where a lot of my students are told that they don't have the right to exist. Like, I'm gonna make sure that there's somebody who tells 'em that they do and who tells them that, you know, I tell my students all the time like, they hate us because we refuse to hate, we refuse to hate ourselves. And the thing that they hate the most about us is our joy. Queer joy is the greatest act of resistance you can perform.

Dr. Marge's vocational journey was so significant and in alignment with who she is that she could casually joke about being a part of this work until they make her leave and that firm foundation and responsibility to the work is rooted in her vocational journey. The work was spoken about as something bigger, not just for herself but for her students. She talked extensively about how queer joy, self-acceptance, and love is an act

of resistance and her experience illustrates just how important the vocational alignment is to a HESA professional's work.

In a similar nature to Dr. Marge's vocational alignment, two other professionals in cultural centers shared how they approached their work. Jameson, a professional with five years of experience and who was serving in a multicultural center, shared, "For, from a self-care kind of standpoint or other coping skills I've had to learn, although difficult for me because it's not, this isn't just a job. It is how I do life, right? This work is embodied work." Jameson was talking specifically about how he created boundaries for himself in work that he named "embodied work" and he identified that that very work can spill over into personal life. For him, that looked like saying no and putting his phone on do not disturb after 6PM on weekdays.

Simone, with five years of professional experience, who at the time of her interview served in a cultural center spoke about her experience versus her team members, "I think I care, I cared more than my team did. I did, I think it was a job for them. And to me it's a vocation." This complex experience, although powerful as professionals serve in student facing roles, can lead to questioning retention. Laura, who served in athletic academic support, with six years of experience, mentioned in her interview an outstanding question she considers, "how long will I last" in relation to her retention in the field versus exploring work that is more manageable. The vocational alignment revealed how significant the work is to professionals' lives, the two are so closely intertwined. An experience where HESA professionals place themselves in a larger context, usually represented by ignoring well-being or creating a sense of individual responsibility to a student(s) success.

Heroism/Savior Complex

Various participants casually identified ways that they had been placed or had personally placed themselves in a space of heroism. Some comments went so far as to indirectly reflect some characteristics of what I would define as a "savior complex." Brittany, a student organization advisor with six years of experience, was at one time looking to leave the field at one point when at a conference, her friends reminded her of her impact, "Like you, you are good at this work. You are one of the people that serves students." She went on to share that the comment made her realize how much she cares about her students and that they even realize that as "outsiders" to her experience. Her friends' "outsiders" do not see her on a daily basis at work; but, even from a distance they could recognize how much she "poured into her students" and how much she cared about them.

Just as Brittany heard this from her friends, Ben, a student organization advisor with 9 years of experience, recounted similar comments from a student, "You are our last resource for us, we would be lost without you." He went on to share that he hadn't heard that before and it made him reflect on the positive impact he has on students' lives and that he is "doing good work." Brittany and Ben are not alone in receiving messages that their presence was critical to the field of higher education student affairs. However, those very comments can also turn into an unhealthy habit of not maintaining personal boundaries for the sake of the students being served. For example, Zenni, who worked in the field for fourteen years and who was currently supporting academic advisors, at one point took several weeks away from work to go through chemotherapy would return to her office to see that things were not going as well as they would have, if she had been

there, “I was gone for six weeks and the office just like fell apart and everyone was really mad and students were really mad.” She went on to share how her absence made her staff realize just how much she managed:

> And then I came back in May and my office was just like, we have no idea. We had no idea what you deal with because you come in and you're always like peppy and you're always great and you're always, you know, and so, flexible in this. But with you gone, they came to us and it, they weren't nice. It's like, we don't know how you do it. And so, I kind of liked that. Like they appreciated, they showed some appreciation.

It would be unrealistic to say that Zenni’s experience was an outlier; however, the sense of heroism/savior complex can create unhealthy practices. In Zenni’s case, she found affirmation in knowing that her team appreciated all of her hard work and how she managed things. That affirmation can create a cyclical experience and managing boundaries can be ignored. In Zenni’s interview, that was illustrated as she returned to work between treatments.

Being able to be away from work, releasing the sense of heroism, is something that Maddie, an academic advisor with six years of experience, valued, noting, “Something my therapist really helped me with is like, ‘Well, you make a difference in students’ life, but you're not making *the* difference. Like you're not the only person interacting them” and that sound advice reminded her of how professionals in the field are socialized and how to separate personal identity from work:

> I think we almost -- I don't want to say ‘trick,’ -- student leaders into becoming student affairs professionals, but it's like, ‘Well, you're so great you should do

this!' and then we get all like, 'Hmm, okay,' and then we get, you know: here. But I think like it's trying to disentangle my identity from my job or my work.

The therapist's statement really resonated with Maddie in a way that presented a metaphorical "light-bulb" moment, a sense of revelation shown in her animated inflection and non-verbal cues during this exchange. Maddie's narrative culminated in a new sense of clarity surrounding the current situation surrounding HESA professionals including herself ("here,"). In Maddie's recounting, serving as a professional in the field, is a journey that some student leaders are led towards by professionals that they work with. In the course of retelling, Maddie presented her new understanding of that pattern, as eye-opening. She went on to say that she regularly checked in with herself, to prevent falling into hyper vigilance, naming the facts that none of her students arrived on campus with a clean slate and that she was not the *only* professional working with the students.

Importance of Mental Health as Coping Skills Evolve

During each interview, participants were asked to share how their coping skills have changed over time in their careers. Participants shared that working to set boundaries, engaging in faith traditions, and journaling have all changed, in some cases in a linear manner, improving over time as they have worked professionally. A prevalent thread, mentioned by several participants, was their own mental health journey. Alan, Brittany, Jameson, Laura, Maddie, Natasha, and Rayn all shared how they were engaging in therapy, either at the current moment or earlier in their professional careers.

Alan spoke to the reality that engaging with counseling can come and go as needed and he initially started after realizing he had hit a point where he wanted to just walk out of his job, "I did start counseling then, which was weird, 'cause like I said, there

are plenty of things that have happened to me in my life that I should have gotten counseling for and probably will again one day." Alan found that engaging with counseling helped him manage stressful moments when he felt like leaving his job, "I think that helped a little bit starting that counseling. So, I did that for a while. Worked with a psychiatrist, and got on some medication." Alan went on to share that medication helped "level him out" and when situations occurred he was no longer starting at an eight or nine out of ten.

Brittany shared that through "a lot of therapy" she has become more comfortable talking to someone. She began therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to talk to someone when she was unable to connect with people as she had been used to. She gave credit to therapy as the primary way she was able to maintain her wellbeing in her previous role, which entailed many responsibilities that were "not her favorite."

Jameson shared that he sees a psychiatrist and a psychologist, "I go to therapy and I want to ensure that if I need medication that I'm properly medicated to help me navigate and deal with things that might come up." He went on to share how going to therapy is a part of his goal to take his health seriously. One way that he does that, outside of seeing his psychiatrist and psychologist, is by calling out the equity issue of roles that are student-facing but lack flexibility. For example, he offered, he worked in different places on campus since his office had no windows for his mental health. Jameson concluded then, "You're often told that you can't be out of the office because you are student-facing… I have to give myself permission to step away and again, know that things will be fine, right?" Jameson calling out this equity issue revealed just how implicit

expectations can impact HESA professionals' mental health and how those implicit expectations can create barriers to professionals' well-being.

Laura jokingly shared how she talks about her work during therapy, more than she thought she would have, noting that she did not consider her work is not her primary identity, "I've gotten into therapy recently and I talk about work more than you would ever think that someone would talk about work. Because . . .in my mind, I don't describe myself as what I do." Having space to debrief work-related experiences with a mental health professional was a way that Laura could process her own life experiences. She continued by sharing how in therapy she had worked through some work issues that were "heavy" and had realized how her race and gender play a role in her mental health journey, "But work, talking through my therapist about some work stuff. You're like, yeah, that is heavy. Or like, yeah, I am dealing with that 'cause I am a Black woman." Laura rounded out her response by sharing how therapy and mental health check ins have been a valuable coping skill.

Maddie was transparent in saying, "I think a lot of people who have experienced hard things tend to go into fields where they feel like they can help people" as she shared that through therapy she has found out about pre-existing conditions that she was managing. In her family dynamic, she is the oldest sibling and as she put it, being the oldest means she would "help all the people" and she talked about how has managed anxiety. Her birth order and her serving as a support person for her students could create an overlapping experience as she manages her mental health. Maddie explained that therapy has helped her establish strong boundaries. One work-related boundary that she described setting was checking her email only during regular work hours. In Maddie's

retelling, this boundary has helped her manage her job-related stress, especially after her experiences in her previous residence life role. In that role, she lived where she worked, and discovered the importance of creating a separation between work and home life.

Natasha described seeking advice from her therapist as she worked to support students, “I talk to my therapist about what is some way that I can like help students process a thing without being their therapist” as a way to identity essential questions to ask her students. Her therapist helped her build a toolkit of resources as she serves as a sounding board for students. Natasha shared how therapy has helped her create boundaries when she is supporting students so that it does not consume her completely but redirects students to work to manage their life events.

Rayn, a professional in a cultural center focused on gender and sexuality, with three years of experience, shared how a professional role changed their access to mental health support when they became a professional, specifically, “…stability and security of having a full-time position with benefits” as they engaged in therapy to help them navigate challenging experiences. A full-time role was critical for Rayn to afford therapy as a way to manage personal and professional life. Prior to the full-time role, Rayn was trying to manage the sliding scale of therapy bills with their mental health needs, “I was like, should I be spending $80 for this session when I like should buy groceries? There would be times where I was like, okay, I can't see you for three months, but I'm hoping to come back.” They went on to share how therapy, a tool that is accessible now, helped them feel more grounded in supporting students rather than flying by the seat of their pants while supporting students. Rayn has been consistently seeing a therapist since 2020 and shared how positive the consistency has been and their thoughts on people in helping

professions to seek therapy, "...felt really restorative, and beneficial, because it's just so important, I think, for like all student affairs professionals, but also anyone that does any kind of care work." Rayn's stance on therapy was based on having an outside opinion to talk to, to provide clarity and a space to "let it all air out."

Significance of Professional Relationships & Community

As participants managed their mental health journeys, the professional relationships and community were another tool that they cited as a necessary support for their retention in the field. Delaney shared that her professional networks and community assisted in her retention, noting "It's the people and I used to say that, and I think it was very trite. No, it oh, it's the people, and it's the community." Delaney's animated tone and the shift of emphasis she used to highlight the last few words of this quote made it clear in the moment that she believed strongly that — despite it seeming trite — 'the people' she interacted with at work, and the community of practitioners were uniquely important in her ability to continue in the field. Delaney shared that having a community of supportive practitioner-colleagues was a current challenge for her. She described transitioning recently from her previous role in Housing, and consequently "feeling it hard right now because I'm very isolated right now." What Delaney shared is similar to what a new professional, Rayn described experiencing as they noted that the support of colleagues had been instrumental in their efforts to navigate issues of self and politics:

> And I also think what I've learned in the last three years of professional staff is like, 'Find really good colleagues and mentors that you do trust, that you can kind of let your mask down with, that you can commiserate with, and be in camaraderie with.' But as your authentic self, because I think there is so much

> politicking. Like, you maintain relationships in this work to get resources to access things, to create easier pathways for students.

Rayn’s experience in creating and nurturing a community of support was rooted in authenticity and a space that welcomes that. As Rayn and other participants shared, professional relationships and community are critical for their retention. Rayn’s ability to be authentic within their community is a significant way to provide space for processing work, engaging with others in the field, and feeling supported.

Professional relationships and establishing a strong community served as a way for participants to process the highs and lows of work, brainstorm solutions, and overall ensure that they would be able to continue serving their students. Laura and Imani, who had ten years of professional experience, and was serving as a student organization advisor, noted that engaging with professionals within the field who were able to easily understand the nuances they were experiencing helped them in developing their approach to navigating challenges. Those shared experiences created conversations that did not require painting a full picture, but rather could resemble processing with someone who understands the reality of the work. Laura, for example, shared how conversations with other HESA professionals without having to provide context is helpful:

> You don't have to ask crazy questions. You just understand what they're going through. You're like, ‘Yep, I feel you. I know that sucks.’ And then when it's my turn, I call. So, I think that the friends in the field have helped.

Throughout the experiences of the participants, the need for solid professional relationships and communities revealed how significant those spaces are in relation to retention. As Delaney shared, even if she found it trite, the people who she connected

with served as a retention tool, as Rayn shared, being in a space that welcomed authenticity served as a retention tool, and as Laura shared, being able to connect with other professionals in the field without sharing context served as a retention tool. The professional relationships and communities that participants are part of or witnessed all served as an informal way for them to remain in the field.

Mixed Reviews of Institutional Resources

During each interview, participants were asked to describe any institutionally provided resources that they engaged with that could be indirectly connected to their retention in higher education student affairs. To clarify a specific aspect of this theme, participants may or may not have a wealth of resources at their disposal; however, I was specifically interested in their perceptions of these resources and in understanding what resources they engaged with and felt could be linked to their retention in the field. Participants voiced mixed reviews of institutional resources; participants were at opposite ends of the spectrum, either naming ways that institutional resources were instrumental in their decisions to stay, or detailing how a lack of resources created pause for them, as they thought about their futures in the field.

Illustrating the latter, more negative experience, Alan shared, “I work at an institution that, I mean, to be quite honest, does not care if you stay or go. To be honest with you, they don't care.” Similarly, Ally who had 6 years of experience and who worked in student organization advising at the time of our interview, shared, “I think our university is definitely trying, like they’re saying like, ‘Stay stay. We really want you to stay, blah, blah blah blah.’ But I don't really know how that's like actually reflected [in policy and practice].” During both interviews, Alan and Ally shared their experiences in a

way that was salient to them. Their experiences were so salient to them that they were able to respond quickly in their respective interviews. The quick response was interpreted as the most accurate and vulnerable experience that they have identified. In fact, Ally referenced the free ice cream she received on campus as an offering of appreciation from her university's administration. On the same day as her interview, her institution shared that they were focused on staff retention and one tangible way they did that was by giving out free ice cream. Ally went on to share that some of her colleagues found that retention tool to be insufficient, "...we were like, oh, I feel so retained, like as a joke." She recognized that her institution was trying but named that she did not think it was the "right kind of trying" and as colleagues on her team leave the institution for higher salaries, Ally can recognize that the work and her students are keeping her retained at the moment.

Outside of the cultures that Alan and Ally experienced, Natasha attributed her thoughts about leaving the field to a lack of financial support from her institution, "…the lack of institutionally provided resources is precisely why I'm considering leaving higher ed." Natasha serves in a cultural center and unfortunately, cultural centers are chronically underfunded (Hefner, 2002). A similar thought was echoed by Zenni and while her institution provided counseling for employees, she noted that access to those resources was limited:

> We have access to like our counseling center where we get, like, free sessions where we can go. But I also know that our counseling center is very low resourced. And so, it's like, 'Why would I take up time when our students are on a

three-month wait?'. To get an initial intake appointment and much less to get reoccurring appointments.

A number of participants likewise described a lack of resources and highlighted ways that the culture on campus, the need for additional compensation, and a lack of counseling support had contributed to their own ideation around leaving the field. Several resources that were particularly salient to them, included recognition, educational benefits, access to professional development, and policies that encouraged wellbeing. Ben shared how recognition, tuition remission, and campus facilitated professional development served as resources for his retention. Ben mentioned further that his institution had an award that came with prize money:

> We have an individual award, we have a team award that a department or team gets. And I think it's $2,000 that gets divided up amongst your team. And I think there's one that's $500 for an individual. But my team won that award this year. So, getting recognition from our president's office really helped in retaining [us], also the relationships that I've built here.

Ben also shared how tuition remission and university-facilitated professional development was an institutional resource that supported his retention. In the same vein of professional development. Imani shared how professional conferences paid for by her institution supports her retention, "… participating in AFA which is the Association for Fraternity and Sorority Advisors or NASPA. So, different like professional development opportunities. And I think that, you know, my institution obviously pays for me to, to do those things." Outside of recognition and professional development support, prioritizing wellbeing was a common thread specifically around the flexibility at work and

encouraging the use of vacation and flex time. Alongside Ben, Maddie also shared that flexible work schedules had supporting their retention in the field. Similarly related to wellbeing and time away, Claire, an academic advisor with nine years of experience, shared that her institution encouraged employees to take time off:

> They're also making sure that we use our vacation time…if we're putting in more than forty hours, which we're contracted, contracted for, they are not forcing us, but strongly encouraging us to flex our time so I mean, even for example, yesterday I took like an hour and a half lunch because I put in thirty minutes extra of time on Monday.

It is important to highlight that the participants, even with mixed reviews of institutional resources, named that they were supported at an institutional level. There was one specific narrative that called out the way in which professionals have to create their own solutions. Within the mixed reviews of institutional resources, some participants had to establish "do-it-yourself" solutions to manage their retention concerns. Jameson called out how flexibility was not a systemic resource but rather one that he had to create himself:

> Now, if we're talking about institutional resources, and if I'm being completely honest with [you], you know…I think a lot of the pieces that I'm talking about, even around remote work or some of that flexibility or things that I've had to take that weren't given.

Institutional resources, or the lack there of, surfaced in every interview. Participants recounted navigating unsupportive cultures, supportive systemic resources, and the autonomy to create their own solutions. Regardless of the resource, every

professional shared just how much the work that they are doing means to them and their community, a vocation.

Revisiting Research Questions

To analyze the connection to the research questions, each question has been fleshed out to illustrate how participants engaged with each question. The three research questions; what experiences do participants recount as leading to their secondary traumatic stress, what resources and/or opportunities do participants identify (potentially provided by supervisor(s), departments, institutions, professional organizations, etc.) for them to be retained in the field, and how do participants describe their reasoning in deciding to remain in student affairs were all intended to reveal the work place hazards that HESA professionals have to manage as they support students through traumatic life events.

Question One. What experiences do participants recount as leading to their secondary traumatic stress?

Prior to participants sharing what experiences may have led to them experiencing secondary traumatic stress, the focused freewrite (Stevens & Cooper, 2009) created an opportunity for reflection before recalling experiences that for some, created an emotional and physical reaction. Following the focused freewrite, participants were able to recall a range of experiences and Table 4 identifies the range of experiences that participants identified from their careers in the field. The most mentioned experiences were sexual assault, mental health struggles, and suicidal ideations. An example of a sexual assault was when Alan shared that there was a report of a sexual assault in a fraternity house that was allegedly videotaped. An example of mental health struggles

was when Zenni shared that during a period of time there were about thirty students appealing their academic probation and the common thread was their experience managing anxiety and depression as they worked to manage their academic careers. An example of supporting students through suicidal ideations was when Simone shared that at one point she was the only person on her team who was trained to support students through suicide ideations which made her the point person for supporting students who were thinking about dying by suicide.

Outside of the most mentioned incidents, participants shared that they managed secondary traumatic stress due to current events surrounding racist violence and terrorism. Dr. Marge shared how her students made sense of current events such as the Club Q shooting and the heighted sense of anxiety with ruling in cases when unarmed Black people were killed, and Rayn shared how students were working to make sense of protests/counter protests, hate crimes, and gun violence as the political nature shifted students' perceptions of safety. Dr. Marge and Rayn's examples revealed how the local, state, and world issues are intertwined with the students experiences outside of what HESA professionals may consider the norm. The impact of current events is unpredictable, and HESA professionals are tasked with making sense of things for themselves and with their students.

Some participants shared that the focused freewrite helped them quickly list their experiences. As Laura shared, "I can't believe how many there've been over the years. You know, like I was just kind of listing them out. That was kind of where my brain was going." None of the participants struggled to come up with examples during the specific interview question or throughout the interview, for most participants they were able to

identify lived experiences that resonated with them within the five minutes of the focused freewrite activity. Brittany even shared that the freewrite took her back in time, even thinking about students at former institutions, “As I started to go through the list and like, it's bringing up students in my mind and people that I care about and still stay connected to, even though I may not be at their institution anymore.” For most, their recollection was vivid and detailed. Observing this illustrated just how significant it is for professionals to support their students through life events that may be considered traumatic.

The five themes analyzed offer insight into this research question. For example, participants described navigating the occupational hazards that show up as (1) vocational alignment in the field, (2) heroism/savior complex, (3) importance of mental health as coping skills evolve, (4) the significance of professional relationships & community, and (5) a mixed review of institutional resources. Participants experiences provided clarity as to how secondary traumatic stress can materialize and impact HESA professionals.

Question Two. What resources and/or opportunities do participants identify (potentially provided by supervisor(s), departments, institutions, professional organizations, etc.) for them to be retained in the field?

As identified in the theme, *Mixed Reviews of Institutional Resources*, participants shared a wealth of responses and some jokingly shared how their institutions, specifically, did not provide resources for their retention. Jameson shared in detail how he provides flexibility for his team, flexibility that the institution does not provide, because he knows his “worth and value.” Not surprising, participants having a professional network, on their campus or in national organizations, were a helpful

resource for their retention, particularly for access to individuals who understand the unique and nuanced work that they were responsible for rather than connecting with someone outside of the field.

Question Three. How do participants describe their reasoning in deciding to remain in student affairs?

In tandem between the themes, *Vocational Alignment* and *Heroism/Savior Complex*, participants were in what I would illustrate as a Venn diagram where both themes meet in the middle as it related to their reasoning to remain in the field. The range of reasoning highlights just how the work is seen as far bigger than individuals but rooted in the wellbeing of others and some participants even named the connection from their experiences in college as a way to approach their work professionally, specifically calling out ways that professionals molded them through their college and professional careers and supported them to the opposite of that as a way to do better for the students and professionals in their communities. Jameson shared how during his undergraduate career the Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students gave him a job and planted a seed of care as she taught him about student accompaniment and how to advocate for students. He went on to share that her level of care and concern is the reason why he is doing this work to see if he can "make the same impact or have the same presence that she had for me and other staff from his alma mater." From participants interviews, the work that they were doing was seen as something far bigger than them, and for some participants, they ignored personal boundaries to meet the needs of their students.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the results of the constructivist narrative inquiry analysis of professional's experiences managing secondary traumatic stress. The participants' narratives were highlighted as they vulnerably engaged in an interview. Theme identification was done in two steps; one, using a coding process guided by Saldaña (2015) and two, various iterations of descriptive coding and memoing during each interview. Throughout the coding and memoing process, there were common threads that emerged into themes. The five themes identified were vocational alignment in the field, heroism/savior complex, importance of mental health as coping skills evolve, the significance of professional relationships and community, and mixed reviews of institutional resources. Overall, it is clear that the participants who took part in this study still believed in the work of student affairs higher education. Nevertheless, they all could easily identify ways that the field could improve in its support of professionals. Through body language, joking to mask the realities that are not aligned with wellbeing, and naming the emotions they felt during some responses, overall, participants made it clear that student-facing roles in higher education student affairs are meaningful for professionals even when it's challenging and their experiences were an honor to witness.

CHAPTER FIVE

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In Chapter 4, I discussed the results of the constructivist narrative inquiry analysis of professionals' experiences managing secondary traumatic stress. The participants' narratives were highlighted as they were vulnerably engaging in a virtual interview. Throughout the coding process followed Saldaña's (2015) method, employing multiple iterations of descriptive coding and taking running notes during each interview for clarity, to identify themes that as accurately and fully as possible represented the participants' experiences. Throughout the coding and memoing process, there were common threads that emerged into themes. The five themes identified were vocational alignment in the field, heroism/savior complex, importance of mental health as coping skills evolve, the significance of professional relationships & community, and mixed reviews of institutional resources. Participants believed in their work, and in the same breath they could identify ways that the HESA field could improve in supporting professionals. During interviews, body language from participants, masking their realities by joking, and expressing the emotions that they felt towards interview questions, participants revealed how student-facing work was meaningful to both their students and themselves. As a researcher, I was honored to witness them sharing so freely. In this chapter, I will revisit key findings in connection to the study's research questions and the theoretical framework, discuss implications for practice and for research, explore limitations, and share my concluding thoughts.

Key Findings in Relation to Previous Research

The key findings of this study are rooted in the participants narratives: 1) norms and structures in the profession compromised participants' wellbeing, 2) emotionally demanding student-facing roles require support, and 3) a sense of community for HESA professionals is directly related to retention. This study, situated between The Great Resignation phenomenon and the framework of secondary traumatic stress, contributed findings to help address the problem of retention in the field. The Great Resignation has become a prevalent topic of conversation in higher education, specifically in student affairs (Schroeder, 2022; Kelliher, 2022b; Brightbill, 2021; Schroeder, 2021; Stebleton & Buford, 2021). Although research on secondary traumatic stress was initially focused on the experiences of professionals working in social work, public school education, and counseling (Bride, 2007; Caringi et al., 2015; Pinto, 2001) studies in higher education student affairs have emerged more recently (Chernoff, 2016; Hodge, 2017; Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022). This study aimed to understand the experiences and attributions HESA professionals share regarding their decisions to remain in the field, even after supporting students through traumatic events. Understanding why professionals remain in the field can positively inform supervisors', departments', and institutions' practices concerning the retention of staff during a climate of mass exodus.

The key findings: 1) norms and structures in the profession compromised participants' wellbeing, 2) emotionally demanding student-facing roles require support, and 3) a sense of community for HESA professionals is directly related to retention, confirm in some way and extend the foundation built by previous research. In Chapter 2, I identified how secondary traumatic stress has been explored by HESA scholars,

particularly how the framework can be applied to roles that may not have fit into the traditional idea of a helping profession in 1995 (Dickson & Beech, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Hodge, 2017; Chernoff, 2016; Clark, 2022). Themes from current research show how person/organizational fit and environments, supervision, support network, seeking counseling, improving training, graduate and professional preparation, and professional organizations can positively shape student

Norms and Structures within the Profession Compromise Professionals' Well-Being

The profession is responsible for setting the tone for the field, including institutions and professionals. Based on participants experiences shared, a key finding revealed how the profession is complicit in both creating and continuing a harmful culture along with manipulating professionals who are called to the field. Alan recalled a moment when his Dean questioned if his colleagues was cut out for this work:

> I remember, this is a couple years ago there was a Dean and one of my newer staff members or newer team members and the Dean must have asked like, oh, how do you like, you know, working with Gerald and they're like, oh, he's great, he is a great supervisor, very supportive. And the dean's response was, well then maybe he's not pushing you hard enough. So that's kind of how, that's how this institution runs, to be quite honest with you, is that we, for a lot of people, they try to push people to the brink of what they're capable of to see what they're capable of in a lot of, in a lot of ways. And they expect, and they know that people will turn over. And if they turn over it's because they're not a good fit. Because they can't, they can't handle the stress, they can't handle the environment, the pace, whatever it is. And I think unfortunately that's the culture.

Alan sharing his experience illustrated how the profession creates and continues a harmful culture. In his narrative, it is a positive reality that Gerald was doing well; however, his Dean showed concern that Gerald was not pushing Alan hard enough. In relation to this finding, Alan confirmed that the culture created this type of conversation. This cultural norm creates a level of manipulation of professionals who are called to this work. This level of manipulation is directly related to the common thread that HESA professionals are called to do this work, opening them up for emotional manipulation, something that Ben described, “I think we all go into this hoping that we're going to have an impact on somebody's life or there was somebody who had an impact on our life and we wanna pay it, want to pay it forward.” What Ben shared was not singular; however, with an emotional tie to the field, professionals open themselves up to manipulation and the profession takes advantage of that. That taking advantage can look like putting professionals in unhealthy situations as Delaney shared as she was supposed to tell as student to leave the university after being raped, or how Natasha went to a funeral of a student who died without time to properly sort through her own grief of losing a student, or how Brittany supported a student who was on campus during a school shooting and returned as a graduate student. This experience was highlighted in Marling (2006) when discussing wellness and the profession, “Overall, student affairs administrators expressed a lack of focus on wellness issues in student affairs literature, professional organization, and graduate preparation programs” (p. 63). In the study, participants, *n*=330, looked to determine what the wellness baseline is from members of NASPA and the profession. For members of NASPA to indicate that professional organizations are not focused on

wellness further supports this finding and requires more to be done in this area for the sake of professionals and the profession.

Norms and structures within the profession compromise professionals' well-being, extends the previous literature that puts professional organizations responsibility (Chernoff, 2016; Lynch, 2017) at the forefront of the conversation. Professional organizations are in a position to adjust the culture to better support the well-being of the professionals in the field. As graduate programs prepare students for full-time, student-facing work, it's critical that graduate preparation programs center the well-being of students so they continue doing so in their full-time work, which extends previous research (Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022). Ultimately, as professional organizations grapple with retention concerns, it's extremely significant for them to take a moment to critically examine if the current structure and culture is what they aspire to facilitate long term.

Emotionally Demanding Student-Facing Roles Require Support

As indicated in Table 4, participants have supported students through a wealth of experiences. Every participant in this study served in a student-facing role and to support students through traumatic life events is an emotional experience. With that experience, HESA professionals in student-facing roles require supervision support and institutional support so they can both be well for themselves and for their students. Alan was the only participant that indicated ways that his team processes student-facing support:

> With our team in particular, we try to talk about kind of the stressors and the trauma and all the things that we deal with 'cause we do deal with it a lot. Whether that's, you know, alcohol and other drug issues or personal mental health struggles with students, sexual assault or sexual violence, all the different things

> that you might deal with on campus, if you're someone who has a lot of interaction with students. That can take a toll on you after a while. So, we talk about it in our team a lot. Which has been great, I think the last couple of years 'cause like everyone on my team, I don't require them to do this, but I think because we have like open conversations about it, like we all go to counseling, right? Or have gone to counseling of some sort, or know that, hey, that resources are there if we need it and maybe, hey, maybe it's time. I'm feeling a little stressed, I'm feeling a little off or whatever way. So, maybe it's time to just kind of reconnect with, you know, a counselor, a mental health professional and just kind of get a foundation or touch base again. So, I think we've been really fortunate in that way.

It is unfortunate that only one participant shared the culture of processing; however, it does reveal just how important it is to focus on supervision and institutional support as HESA professionals walk alongside their students through difficult life events. That level of supervisory and institutional support is affirmed in Kelliher (2022a) as professionals in student-facing roles indicated that being on the front line with students, "…the mental health crisis on campus is so pervasive now that no matter where you work in higher education, you're on the front lines of students who are themselves dealing with mental health" (para. 10). Kelliher's material addressed how student-facing professionals have to manage such a prevalent reality and being supported by supervisors and institutions is valuable, Womack (2020) mentioned the need for this discussion, "Currently, there is a heavy focus on new professionals in the workplace but not a specific focus on how the supervisory relationship is related to engagement with the

institution" (p. 3). Having a positive and mutually beneficial supervisory relationship and in return, engagement at the institutional level is in alignment with the key finding.

Emotionally demanding student-facing roles require support in both supervision support along with institutional support, extends the previous literature (Chernoff, 2016; Clark, 2022; Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017) specifically, the need to pivot to synergistic supervision and trauma-informed care. Synergistic supervision, "requires a cooperative effort between the supervisor and the supervised" (Winston & Creamer, 1998, p. 30). This dual focus, the "cooperative effort" ensures that professionals are in collaboration with their supervisor's expectations and top-down decisions while being mindful of the prior trauma that professionals naturally carry. As a number of participants shared, their supervisor either on their own or by sharing a top-down decision, put professionals in situations that are emotionally unhealthy.

A Sense of Community for HESA Professionals is Directly Related to Retention

For participants, having a community of care and support was invaluable, not as a just in case measure but as a preventative way to remain in the field. A strong sense of community was the focus of Natasha's suggestion to her university Human Resources department:

> I have been in contact with HR to hopefully create like a young professional's group. So, that, because I know we're not gonna keep people, but while they're here, I want them to feel community because that's like what we are best with. Like most of my colleagues, most of the friendship, or not most, but a lot of the friendships that I've been able to make with my colleagues, those people very

quickly leave. But they do leave and talk about the relationships that they're able to create here.

Natasha went on to say that she remains at her institution, partially because she has family in the area; however, for her peers who do not have that connection, leaving the university is more common and frequent. Rayn shared how a lack of community can feel when students come and go and the work feels isolating at a bigger school, “If we work at larger institutions, a lot of us kind of feel like cogs in the machine there's not really a sense of community.” Both Natasha and Rayn shared ways that a strong sense of community can provide care and support which leads to retention of professionals. Specifically, a community of peers. People who understand the work and can be a support network. As Laura mentioned, her village of support takes turns processing the highs and lows of their work. Similarly, Imani and Brittany shared how their conference communities also serve as a community which is directly related to their retention in the field. The connection between support and retention was echoed in Brodie et al., (2021) as the study focused on student affairs professionals thriving, “Employee retention as an outcome supported by strong relationships in the workplace” (p. 65) and Womack went on to cite Feeley et al., (2008) in identifying how closeness within employee networks would deter turnover. The literature supports the key finding and serves as a retention tool as the field continues to grapple with attrition.

A sense of community for HESA professionals is directly related to retention, extends the conversation on the importance of support networks (Chernoff, 2016; Clark, 2022). A thread from participants when talking about why they remain in the field was the people, the community. Having a sense of community is valuable and by having

people who know you and care about you is significant and it creates an environment of care where professionals stay because of the people. Support networks play a significant role in retention and as institutions focus on retention efforts, creating and nurturing communities that can serve as support networks can benefit both the professional and the institution.

The key findings add to the previous literature and extend the conversation to functional areas that have not been studied. This alignment shows just how pervasive secondary traumatic stress is for HESA professionals to navigate as it does not impact the typical roles we expect to see managing student's trauma such as housing (Hodge, 2016) and student conduct (Chernoff, 2016). By highlighting three functional areas in this way, the key findings solidify the need for HESA professionals across campuses to be supported differently, better, not only for their personal well-being but for the well-being of the field.

Participants' Experiences with Secondary Traumatic Stress

As a research professional in the field, I was really interested to see what experiences other HESA professionals experienced, specifically in three functional areas that I have not worked in full-time. What was fascinating to observe is just how similar the participants' experiences were to each other and to mine. Methodologically, time to reflect was a helpful tool and each participant was able to recall a wide range of experiences that they have experienced in the totality of their careers.

Participants shared that the focused free writing helped them quickly list the experiences as Laura shared, "I can't believe how many there've been over the years. You know, like I was just kind of listing them out. That was kind of where my brain was

going.” None of the participants struggled to come up with examples during the specific interview question or throughout the interview. Brittany even shared how the freewrite took her back in time, even thinking about students at former institutions, “As I started to go through the list and like, it's bringing up students in my mind and people that I care about and still stay connected to, even though I may not be at their institution anymore.”

The findings show how top of mind these experiences are for HESA professionals as Laura confirmed and the connection that professionals have to their students, current or former, as Brittany illustrated. To connect these experiences to the theoretical framework, secondary traumatic stress, as a researcher I observed just how HESA professional’s behavior, specifically witnessing the stress, has changed due to supporting students through traumatic life events. This is not to say that professionals do not find “satisfaction derived from the work of helping others”, compassion satisfaction (Stamm, 2002, pg. 107); however, there is a long-lasting impression that HESA professionals can vividly recall. This recollection is psychological in nature and Mistretta and DuBois (2021) articulated that in relation to the profession, “The challenge is to design and modify workplaces in ways that will support the satisfaction of core psychological needs through the performance of the job” (pp. 155-156). What participants had in common was the psychological impact of secondary traumatic stress and it manifested in their ability to quickly share narratives from their respective careers. Based on their recollection, participants’ experiences with secondary traumatic stress are salient and have imprinted on them psychologically

Resources and Opportunities for the Retention of HESA Professionals

As the Great Resignation articles have been published and shared, there is often a common thread of professionals leaving; however, there is little published to identify what resources have assisted in the retention of HESA professionals. I was particularly interested in what creative solutions institutions have come up with as professionals weigh the options of leaving the field or being retained. The findings of this research question illustrated just how institutions are dropping the ball on serving their professional staff.

As identified in the theme, Mixed Reviews of Institutional Resources, participants shared a wealth of responses and some jokingly shared how their institutions, specifically, did not provide resources for their retention. Jameson shared in detail how he provides flexibility for his team, flexibility that the institution does not provide, because he knows his “worth and value.” Not surprising, participants having a professional network, on their campus or in national organizations, were a helpful resource for their retention, particularly for access to individuals who understand the unique and nuanced work that they were responsible for rather than connecting with someone outside of the field.

The findings show how institutional resources are missing the mark for HESA professionals, even those who are currently still doing the work. The literature shows how Jameson’s mention of flexibility is directly correlated to retention as the 2023 CUPA-HR Higher Education Employee Retention Survey results indicated that professionals with more flexibility from their supervisors are less likely to seek other employment (para. 30). Based on the social media groups that exist in support of HESA

professionals, the findings confirm how having a professional community can assist in retention efforts.

How do participants describe their reasoning in deciding to remain in student affairs?

Based on the second research question, I wanted to build off of the personal attachment to the field by asking participants why they are remaining in the field. The findings revealed what I see from my colleagues because as one participant said, this is life work. There is something about “life work” or work that is personally fulfilling and that is, people tend to ignore their own boundaries to do what they love.

In tandem between the theme, *Vocational Alignment and Heroism/Savior Complex*, participants shared their range of reasoning that were mostly settled between the two themes. Every participant exhibited their placement between the two themes and as a researcher and a peer, this finding was significant because it is directly connected to retention. The range of reasoning highlights not just how the work is seen as far bigger than individuals but also rooted in the wellbeing of others. A couple of examples of this can be seen through a couple of participant examples; Claire and Imani. Claire shared how she has been able to set better boundaries and instead engage in critical conversations with students that she is supporting. She shared an example of supporting a fraternity and when a member experienced alcohol poisoning she held onto her boundaries and engaged in a conversation with the student who reached out to her to help him process what to do next, “Like what do you need and then have being able to kind of level with them, if that makes sense.” Through Claire’s experience, she has found balance in finding fulfillment in supporting students while encouraging them to process situations

on their own, with her guidance. Imani shared how she worked to hold another professional accountable when students were drugged at a party and did not want to come forward, "I went back and forth with the advisor like, you know, we can try to keep it anonymous. We gotta try to stop this behavior. This is not what we want to be taking place in the community." Imani had expectations for the community she was serving and because of her connection to the work, she expected the same for the organization advisor. Through Imani's experience, she was able to be vulnerable with her peers because she felt strongly about how the students should be supported and how the community should be protected.

Some participants even named the connection from their experiences in college as a way to approach their work professionally, specifically calling out ways that professionals molded them through their college and professional careers as a way to do better for the students and professionals in their communities. Jameson shared how during his undergraduate career his Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students gave him a job and planted a seed of care as she taught him about student accompaniment and how to advocate for students. He went on to share that her level of care and concern is the reason why he is doing this work to see if he can "make the same impact of having the same presence that she had for me and other staff from his alma mater."

The findings indicate just how significant it was for the participants to either fill a gap that they noticed while in school or mirror what others in the field did for them while they were in college. Unfortunately, in the same vein, some participants shared how they do not respect their own personal boundaries, which may be what they witnessed while

they were in school. Stubbs (2021) highlighted how graduate students and new professionals are the most vulnerable to ignore personal boundaries (p. 48) and Stubbs cited Steiner (2017), “setting boundaries early may prevent burnout” (p. 49). The literature shows that training and preparation is significant as HESA professionals create helpful coping mechanisms and manage supporting students through traumatic life events. With training and preparation, professionals may be better equipped to manage the feeling of vocational alignment with the unhealthy need to overstep their personal boundaries.

Functional Areas

The three functional areas that this study focused on have each seen significant change in the roles played by practitioners, with these roles evolving to meet the needs of students more holistically. The emerging trends that students are facing show the need for evolution to have occurred. Cultural centers have an added responsibility to keep up with current trends and support students through racially and ethnically traumatic headlines (Pittman, 1994; Ponjuán and Hernández, 2021). Student organization advisors have an added responsibility to support their organizations and work to streamline standards (Dahlgren, 2017; ACPA, n.d.; Vanguri, 2010; Dunkel and Schuh, 1998). Academic advisors have an added responsibility to support students’ overall well-being and not just their academic success (Kuhn, 2008; Ireland, 2018).

The results of the study contribute to the existing literature and reveal a new understanding of how HESA professionals are changed due to their student facing work and supporting students through traumatic life events. The emerging trends that are impacting the functional areas were illustrated and it is clear that secondary traumatic

stress is directly connected to the holistic approach that the professionals in these functional areas have to manage. Cultural center professionals are managing an uptick in visual representation of violence towards Black people while simultaneously working to make their campuses anti-racist. Student organizations advisors are wearing multiple hats as their student leaders look to them to support the highs and lows of their lives on campus. Academic advisors are interrogating the why behind students' academic concerns which often reveals bigger concerns that need additional attention from other professionals on campus.

Ultimately, to understand the ways that secondary traumatic stress impacts the profession means that there is an increased understanding of the current work lives of HESA professionals. Participants in this study represent three functional areas that have evolving roles and a common thread throughout every participant is their experience supporting students through traumatic life events and the long-lasting impact of each interaction. As the study findings revealed; HESA professionals' experiences supporting students are top of mind, institutional resources are missing the mark for HESA professionals, even those who are currently still doing the work, and professional organizations can create a cultural shift.

Implications

Implications for Practice

Based on the key findings: 1) norms and structures in the profession compromised participants' wellbeing, 2) emotionally demanding student-facing roles require support, and 3) a sense of community for HESA professionals is directly related to retention. Implications for practice, based on the study reveal the common thread from participants

about their work being bigger than them. The findings highlight that the common thread from participants is their motivation to continue doing good work in higher education student affairs, often going above and beyond. The thematic findings of vocational alignment and heroism/savior complex show how participants find purpose in their work. Alan shared why he remains in the field because he believes in the work and he even called out his unhealthy behavior related to protecting the community he served, “I see myself as a protector in some ways of certain things, probably of my team, of my students of their experiences sometimes and worry what will happen when I'm not here.” In a similar way, Natasha, who shared her dissatisfaction with her financial compensation, wants to protect her peers by creating a stronger community, “I have been in contact with HR to hopefully create like a young professional’s group. I know we're not gonna keep people, but while they're here, I want them to feel community.” Natasha identified ways that her former colleagues talked about the community they had while they were at her institution, even as they transitioned to new opportunities. Based on the thematic findings, it would be valuable for professionals in the field to regularly reflect on their purpose and how they manage their wellness, with or without institutional resources. This reflection time would be an ideal starting point as professionals who feel a greater sense of purpose in their profession.

Reflections for the Profession

The guiding documents for higher education student affairs are the College Student Educators International (ACPA) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) Competencies. The target audience for the competencies are “student affairs professionals” (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 6). Within the competencies,

trauma is mentioned once under Advising and Supporting, “Provide effective post-traumatic response to campus events/situations, collaborating with other appropriate campus departments” (p. 36). It is clear that for these guiding organizations, trauma is not a regular topic of conversation for the wealth of functional areas and roles on a college campus and that should be addressed and adjusted to represent the current responsibilities that professionals in the field are managing.

The findings of this study articulate the need for trauma to be more regularly discussed and supported for professionals in the field as they continuously support students on their respective campuses. Current events such as the pandemic and the heightened visual representation of racism and oppression, communities all over the world have experienced some level of shared trauma. In relation to the uptick in the visual representation of racism and oppression, Campbell & Valera (2020) indicated that racially underrepresented students viewing publicized police violence against unarmed Black men and boys created a reaction consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder. In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, college students' mental health needs have only increased (Son, et al, 2020) which means staff on campus have to fill in the gaps, regardless of their role on campus (Abrams, 2022).

This study illustrates just how pervasive the experience of supporting students through traumatic life events is in the daily work of higher education student affairs professionals. Moreover, study participants’ narratives show how the lack of systemic measures of support can negatively impact the experience of professionals in their careers. Systemic measures could include but are not limited to creating streamlined recovery practices for HESA professionals after supporting a student through a traumatic

life event, or mandatory training opportunities for HESA professionals focused on self-care and boundary setting. Having worked in the profession since my first year as a college student, I felt extremely connected and seen throughout each interview. Supporting students through traumatic life events is an experience that is recognizable among HESA professionals. As students journey through college, HESA professionals are tasked with walking alongside them, through the highs and lows. With such an emotionally demanding shared core experience, people who do this work have a motivation that is bigger than themselves. Navigating these emerging and deepening challenges is even more difficult, especially given the lack of support for individual well-being provided by institutions. My goal in studying the phenomenon of secondary traumatic stress in HESA professionals working in three functional areas (cultural centers, student organization advisors, and academic advisors) was to add needed complexity to the common view that the difficult work of supporting students through traumatic life events is limited to high-touch roles, such as housing or conduct professionals. This study has revealed that HESA professionals are supporting students through traumatic life events and their roles need to be reshaped in order to support students while supporting HESA professionals. I hope that this study is placed amongst the emerging literature to signal to institutions and the profession that work needs to be done to retain professionals and ensure their well-being needs are met.

The profession is set up in a way that puts the responsibility on the professional to advocate for their well-being; however, that responsibility should be on who is in control and who has power and that is the profession. Based on the finding, my recommendation for the profession is that professional organizations take responsibility for the culture they

have created and nurtured over time. The cycle, from undergraduate student leader, to HESA graduate student, to professional can be filled with unrealistic expectations that cloud ways that those professionals are prepared for full-time work.

As undergraduate students explore what HESA is and what it could be as a career; ACPA hosts the NextGen Institute and NASPA hosts the Careers in Student Affairs Symposium. Both are targeted at the undergraduate student population as they explore this profession and during those professional development opportunities. Both organizations also have graduate student communities; Graduate Students and New Professionals Community of Practice through ACPA and New Professionals and Graduate Students (NPGS) Steering Committee through NASPA. Finally, both organizations host annual conferences for professionals in the field.

ACPA and NASPA should both be expected and required to engage with undergraduate students, graduate students, and full-time professionals around well-being and retention. Not as a one off but as a common thread throughout each engagement opportunity. There is no guarantee that retention in the profession would be instantly improved; however, there needs to be regular moments for deep and meaningful conversations around well-being and retention so that the professional does not take on the responsibility to change the system.

Access is a concern around this recommendation because attending any of ACPA and NASPA's conferences is not always supported financially from institutions. With accessibility in mind, ACPA and NASPA should be setting the standard for supervisors and people managers to ensure that their direct reports well-being has been prioritized. These organizations can set the tone and ensure that people in leadership are actively

participating in this cultural shift. This shift is for their direct reports and for them as well. Not every professional in the field has access to national conferences, and out of all of the participants, only one participant mentioned their institution funding a professional conference. That is not to say that others did not have professional development funding; however, only one participant clearly indicated having that financial support. As national conferences become increasingly expensive, registration, lodging, travel, university leadership should stand in the gap for their staff to ensure that staff can afford the opportunity or provide professional development opportunities at a local or regional level that is within budget.

Although these recommendations have been implemented in institutions only in varying degrees, and have yet to be studied closely, they represent an important contribution to the literature, as institutions and professional organizations work to combat the attrition rates in the field.

Implications for Research

As discussed in the literature review above (see Chapter Two), more research is needed to further our understanding of how secondary traumatic stress shapes HESA professionals' roles and experiences. Previous studies have focused on the entire field (Lynch, 2017), specific functional areas (Chernoff, 2016; Hodge, 2017, or on gender and race (Clark, 2022), but there is a pressing need for additional research on the topic. The findings of the 2022 College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) report "Higher Education Employee Retention Survey (ERS)" (2023) align with the crisis in retention identified when Klotz originally wrote about The Great Resignation (Tallo, 2021). The report analyzed data from 4,782 professionals in

higher education and concluded that, “retention was indeed a problem and that employees at risk for leaving saw themselves as overworked, underpaid, and not getting the remote work opportunities they desired” (CUPA-HR, 2023, para 1). The implications for research are rooted in the retention crisis of higher education student affairs professionals and this is a timely reality to continuously research. Participants shared ways that compassion satisfaction and secondary traumatic stress are being balanced, in some way, throughout their work. Based on the regularly changing balance, there are ways that future research can stand in the gap for their well-being and retention.

Future Research

In thinking about future research there are potential paths that could navigated to add to the literature; 1) a longitudinal study, 2) an action research study with interventions introduced, 3) investigating faculty experiences with supporting students through traumatic life events, 4) engaging with student leaders who are responsible for peer-to-peer support, 5) capturing the experiences of current graduate students in HESA programs, and 6) exploring the experiences of HESA professionals who have left the field since 2020.

In a longitudinal study, particularly recognizing that trauma is difficult to measure, it would be valuable to engage in a longitudinal study with a variety of professionals in the field starting during their first year of graduate school to their fifth professional year in the field. First, identifying participants' Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) score to identify a starting point for each participant. ACE scores will not provide clarity for each participant as they engage in the study; however, there would be a starting point for the study which could be beneficial for researching the impacts of

secondary traumatic stress for each participant. As this study indicated, each participant has their own personal trauma that can be a factor in how they respond to their work. This can be seen within the third theme discussed in Chapter 4 (the importance of mental health as coping skills evolve), as participants' lived experiences have impacted the way they see the world and how they approach supporting students.

An action research study would place the ownership on the practitioner in the field as a way to change practices (Ary et al., 2018, p. 16). The goal would be to increase ways that professionals in the field manage the impact of secondary traumatic stress that is truly a hazard of the job. I would suggest implementing an intervention to assess ways that professionals can be supported. As the findings showed, coping skills ebb and flow and one way to capture ways that professionals' mental health can be maintained and supported is by having regular support groups for professionals to engage with as a way to share what has worked for them and what hasn't worked. Support groups can also lend themselves to engaging in conversation around compassion satisfaction and the positive impact that professionals have when supporting students which is directly linked to the themes; vocational alignment and heroism/savior complex.

Studying the faculty experience can extend the conversation across the aisle to scholars who are in the classroom but, who also serve as key players in college students' lives. A study focused on their experience with STS may reveal ways that the entire college experience can be adjusted to a greeter conversation. If results support what HESA professionals have experienced and reported, the findings may increase the relevance of the conversation and in turn create change.

Engaging with student leaders who support peer-to-peer efforts can highlight ways that student leaders are put in positions that cause harm especially for young adults who are also navigating their college experience. At most institutions, the peer-to-peer roles are seen as mentors and guides; however, those same students are developmentally in the same space as their peers and may experience similar challenges.

Capturing the experiences of current graduate students in HESA related programs is one way to get ahead of what the literature shows by assessing how prepared graduate students are to work in the field full-time. Knowing that graduate students, just as professionals, do not begin their graduate school journey without any prior trauma, a study on their experiences may outline ways that graduate programs can extend different support measures as they prepare to transition to a full-time role.

Exploring the experiences of HESA professionals who have left the field since the pandemic and the racial awakening can illustrate just how community trauma played a role in the retention numbers dropping. With community trauma as the baseline, a study of HESA professionals who recently left the field results may inform the policies and procedures they current HESA professionals have to navigate.

Limitations

As any in research, this study has limitations, and there are always areas of improvement. Methodologically, a qualitative constructivist narrative inquiry approach was selected to ensure that storytelling was the analytical focus and that every participant could be vulnerable and heard. Although the methodological approach offered advantages for these goals, qualitative studies with small samples naturally cannot support statistical generalization to a target population. While participants share

narratives, their experiences cannot account for the experiences of professionals in the entire field. Nevertheless, the lack of generalizability does not take away from the validity of the participants' lived experiences. Instead, findings can support transferability through the thick description offered in the participants' narratives, as well as in the thematic analyses outlined throughout Chapter Four.

Additionally, the use of constructivist narrative inquiry leads to being impacted by researcher bias and emotional impact regardless of how the interviews and subsequent follow up is done. Through reflexivity, I was situated in a position to walk alongside each of my participants; but, not to interfere with their lived experiences. As mentioned in Chapter 4, during Delaney's interview I exhibited a visual reaction to her sharing how she navigated her assignment to kick a student out of school who was raped. My reaction was two-fold; one, for the specific situation for Delaney and for the student and two, for the unbelievable expectation from Delaney's Dean of Students. I believe that HESA professionals can normalize situations that are traumatic and, in some moments, they need to see the visual reaction of shock, disappointment, and a level of care and concern. By reacting how I did, I believe my actions accomplished a level of care that could be identified through Zoom. Rather than calmly nodding, I was able to affirm how horrible it must have been to be in Delaney's shoes and thinking about the impact of the student, in that situation.

Securing eligible participants became a challenge after identifying the first seven participants as potential participants completed the STSAP survey but were ineligible. With a total of 130 survey responses, 67 surveys were incomplete, 63 surveys were complete. Out of the total number of survey responses, 25 people were eligible based on

the STSAP score of a 3.0 or higher. The initial goal of using several social media groups to solicit participants, became a challenge, given the study timeline. Specifically, it was difficult to identify eligible participants who are student organization advisors. To address that challenge, I relied on LinkedIn by searching specific job titles, Fraternity and Sorority Life advisors and Student Government Association advisors, and cold emailing people to solicit interest and have people share with their networks. I sent thirty-six individual emails to potential participants and three HESA professionals were eligible and participated in this study. Initially I felt limited by this extra step; however, student organization advising is a full-time job and for others it is an add on based on the functional area, for example cultural center staff may advise culturally relevant student organizations as part of their roles.

Trauma is difficult to measure and in order for a participant to be interviewed, they had to score a 3.0 or higher in the STSAP. The STSAP survey asked participants to indicate their emotional and physical reactions based on supporting students through traumatic life events over the last year. It is unrealistic to assume that each participant was free of their own personal traumatic life events prior to supporting students through their own traumatic life experiences. Measuring trauma is not as simple as an average score on an assessment and it stands to reason that participants' responses to the survey questions could have been impacted based on previous experiences.

Conclusion

Secondary traumatic stress is not a concept that is newly introduced into the field of higher education student affairs (Chernoff, 2016; Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022) and at the core of student-facing work, managing student's traumatic experiences

has been a theme since the creation of the profession. Although Figley (1995) created STS to represent experiences of social workers, public school educators, and counselors (Bride, 2007; Caringi et al., 2015; Pinto, 2001), the definition, "the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other–the stress of wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (p. 7) can easily be applied to the experiences of professionals in higher education student affairs. An emerging body of research has begun to establish an empirical record in this area (Chernoff, 2016; Hodge, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Clark, 2022).

The methodological approach for this study, constructivist narrative inquiry, guided the study and allowed me to reconstruct my participants' realities (Mills & Birks, 2014) through shared narratives (Shay, 1994). I reconstructed, analyzed, and interrogated the meanings that participants assigned to their experiences supporting students through traumatic life events. Additionally, I relied on multiple participants' stories to understand their multifaceted experience, and, as Denzin and Lincoln (2013) describe it, "weave a complex text about race, identity, nation, class, sexuality, intimacy, and family" (p. 9). This methodological approach provided room to honor the complexities of personal experiences rooted in identity and lived experiences from 15 participants with diverse social identities in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, functional area, and time in the field.

The results of the study, based on participant's narratives, were highlighted as they engaged in individual interviews. Theme identification was done in two steps; one, using a coding process guided by Saldaña (2015) and two, various iterations of descriptive coding and memoing during each interview. Throughout the coding and

memoing process, there were common threads that emerged into themes. The five themes identified were 1) vocational alignment in the field, 2) heroism/savior complex, 3) importance of mental health as coping skills evolve, 4) the significance of professional relationships & community, and 5) mixed reviews of institutional resources. Overall, it is clear that the HESA professionals that participated in this study, still believed in the work and at the same time, they all could easily identify ways that the field could improve in its support of professionals. Overall, participants made it clear that student-facing roles in the field are meaningful to them, even when it is challenging.

The Great Resignation, as it is specifically unfolding in HESA, creates an environment where professionals in the field are hitting a wall of capacity. Managing secondary traumatic stress only exasperates the issue. An issue that is two-fold; one, it is important to consider HESA professionals' experiences with secondary traumatic stress because it is making the retention crisis worse and two, HESA professionals are suffering as a result of the field failing them. This study is intended to engage in the attrition concerns in the field, specifically why professionals in specific functional areas remain in the field. Participants shared vulnerabilities and identified situations that have impacted their experiences managing secondary traumatic stress, named institutionally provided resources that supported their retention, and reflected on why they remain in the field overall. Participants' narratives highlighted just how they managed secondary traumatic stress and how they try to, for their overall wellbeing, remain in the field while supporting their students. The conversation should continue because it needs to continue. Professionals in the field are doing good work and they deserve to be well.

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APPENDIX A

Full List of Incidents Shared by Participants

Summary of Incident	Number of Times Mentioned
academically struggling	2
active shooter drills	1
after hours support (various reasons)	1
alcohol and other drug issues	1
alcohol poisoning	1
assault	1
asthma attack	1
caregiving responsibilities	1
divorce	1
effects of COVID	3
engaging in difficult conversations with loved ones	1
falling from windows	1
family separation (deportation/immigration)	1
fear of retribution	1
financial instability	3
food insecurity	2
gun violence	1
harassment	1

hate crimes	1
home sick	1
injury	1
medical withdrawal	1
navigating life	1
non-consensual drugging	1
overall struggling (personal life and academically)	1
parental pressure	1
personal mental health struggles	5
protest and a counter protest	1
reaction to current events	3
sexual assault	7
sexual misconduct	2
shootings on campus	1
stalking	1
student death	3
students managing work	1
suicidal ideation	4
suicide completion	2
supporting peers	1
supporting students during the Trump administration	1

tear gassed	1
throwing rocks through windows	1
unhoused	1

APPENDIX B

Code List via ATLAS.ti

Name	Code group	Quotations
reaction to freewrite	reaction to free-write	15
narrative shared after free write activity	narrative shared after free write activity	15
ways thinking and coping skills have evolved	ways thinking and coping skills have evolved	16
institutional resources (for retention)	institutional resources (for retention)	15
why do you stay	why do you stay	16
random narrative shared	random narrative shared	9
type of situation/incident	type of situation	67
example of coping skills (or lack thereof)	example of coping skills (or lack thereof)	48
institutional resources (or lack thereof)	institutional resources (or lack thereof)	26

APPENDIX C

Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals (STSAP) Scale via Qualtrics

Informed Consent

Informed Consent. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.

Question 1/7. I have read and understood the information above, and agree to voluntarily participate in this survey. *

Functional Area. Please select the functional area that best represents the work that you do. *

- Cultural Center staff
- Academic Advisor
- Student Organization Advisor
- Other:

Question 2/7. Trauma may be thought of as any event or circumstance that overwhelm's a person's capacity to cope. On average, how often do you support students experiencing traumatic life events?

- Never
- Once a year
- Few times a year
- Few days a month
- Few days a week
- Daily

Question 3/7. Please select the types of traumas through which you have supported college students during the academic year 2022-2023. *(Select all that apply)*

- Death of a loved one
- Domestic violence
- Eating disorder
- Family issues (Divorce, abuse, etc.)
- Hate comes, bias, or discrimination
- Home or food insecurity
- Life-threatening illness of injury
- Military Combat
- Natural or man-made disaster
- Physical assault
- Robbery
- Sever mental health episode
- Sexual violence
- Suicidal ideation or attempt
- Witness to a traumatic event
- Other

Reflection 1/1. Take a moment to briefly reflect on the prompt below before moving to the next section.

Think about your support of college students experiencing a traumatic life event over the past year. What were the most recent times you have provided this type of support? What was this experience like for you? Over the following sections, keep these experiences in mind.

Question 4/7. My support of students who have experienced a traumatic life event has left me... [scale: Completely Untrue, Somewhat Untrue, Slightly Untrue, Slightly True, Somewhat True, Completely True]

…avoiding people, places, or things that reminded me of my work with students

… interacting less with friends

… feeling as if I was reliving their traumas myself

…unable to stop thinking about the details of the trauma the student shared with me

…having trouble concentrating

…feeling empty

Question 5/7. My support of students who have experienced a traumatic life event has left me... [scale: Completely Untrue, Somewhat Untrue, Slightly Untrue, Slightly True, Somewhat True, Completely True]

…avoiding working with some students, if possible

…interacting less with family

…feeling upset encountering reminders of my support of students who experienced trauma

…feeling guilt related to the traumatizing event the student experienced

…feeling easily annoyed

…feeling jumpy

Question 6/7. My support of students who have experienced a traumatic life event has left me... [scale: Completely Untrue, Somewhat Untrue, Slightly Untrue, Slightly True, Somewhat True, Completely True]

…avoiding aspects of my job that remind me of interactions with students

…less physically active than usual

…feeling my heart pound when thinking about students who experienced trauma

…having trouble falling asleep

…overreacting to small annoyances

…feeling emotionally numb

Question 7/7. My support of students who have experienced a traumatic life event has left me... [scale: Completely Untrue, Somewhat Untrue, Slightly Untrue, Slightly True, Somewhat True, Completely True]

…avoiding thinking about details of students' traumatic experiences

…less interested in being around other people

…feeling tense when thinking about supporting students who experiences trauma

…having trouble staying asleep

…feeling something bad might happen

Email Address. Please enter your email address.

Years of Service. How many years have you worked in higher education student affairs, in a full-time role?

APPENDIX D

IRB Approval

Kelli Tittle updated ticket 21036885 **IRB Non-Exempt Form** on Wed 6/28/23 2:40 PM Eastern Daylight Time with the following information:

"Changed Status from In Process to Approved.

DATE OF APPROVAL: 6/28/23
TICKET ID: 21036885
Principal Investigator Name: Leah Ward
Project Title: Narrative Analysis of Secondary Traumatic Stress among Higher Education Student Affairs Professionals
Funding: N/A
Incentives: N/A

Leah Ward
University of Dayton
300 College Park
Dayton, OH 45469

Dear Leah,

The subject proposal has been reviewed through expedited procedures, as described in 45 CFR 46.110 Category (X). I am pleased to approve your IRB application, and you may begin your data collection.

REMINDERS TO RESEARCHERS:
· This approval does not expire per 45 CFR 46.109(f)(1)(i).
· The IRB must approve all changes to the protocol prior to their implementation, unless such a delay would place your participants at an increased risk of harm. In such situations, the IRB is to be informed of the changes as soon as possible.
· The IRB is to be informed immediately of any ethical issues that arise in your study. Adverse Event forms can be found on the IRB web site.
· You must maintain all study records, including consent documents, for three years after the study closes. These records should always be stored securely on campus.
· It is the researcher's responsibility to notify the IRB when this study is closed. You can find the Application for Renewal/Closure on the IRB web site.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Best of luck in your research!

Best regards,
Kelli Tittle

FWA00015321, expires 10/14/2025

"

View the details of this request in the UD Service Catalog

University of Dayton
Office for Research
Daniel J. Curran Place | (937) 229-3515