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# The Path Into Student Affairs: How Undergraduate Experiences Influence Students to Pursue a Career in Student Affairs

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*Eastern Illinois University*

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THE PATH INTO STUDENT AFFAIRS:

How Undergraduate Experiences Influence Students to Pursue a Career in Student Affairs

BY

Bryce Jacob Reuer Gergely

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2014

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
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THE PATH INTO STUDENT AFFAIRS:  
How Undergraduate Experiences Influence Students to Pursue a  
Career in Student Affairs  
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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to all of the Student Affairs professionals at my undergraduate institution, Butler University, who devoted countless amounts of time and energy to helping their students learn and grow. If it weren't for them, I would not have been found my calling in the field of Student Affairs and I hope this research can help future Student Affairs professionals find theirs.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would first like to thank my thesis committee for devoting so much of your time and energy to help me create the best document possible. To Dr. Dianne Timm, Ms. Roberta Kingery, and Dr. Jenny Sipes, thank you for your unending support and expertise.

I would not have the passion for Student Affairs if it were not for the incredible experience that I had at my undergraduate institution, Butler University. Thank you to all of the staff members of the Programs for Leadership and Service Education office, the office of the Vice President for Student Affairs, well as all of the amazing friends I made through my involvements in Orientation, Program Board and Delta Tau Delta Fraternity. You all have a huge part in making me the person I am today.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Through every achievement and pitfall for as long as I can remember, I have always had your love and support pushing me forward. To my mom, dad, and Nick, Ryan, Jason, and my darling Becca, thank you for being there for me, rain or shine, and for being such a solid foundation for me to lean on when I needed.

**ABSTRACT**

The career field of Student Affairs is one that most individuals know nothing about until coming to college when they have the chance to interact with professionals in the field. How exactly do individuals come to be professionals in student affairs? This study looks to answer that question through the examination of nine individuals in various stages of the process into Student Affairs, analyzing their experiences throughout their undergraduate career. Special focus is given to experiences during participants' undergraduate education, influences on their decision to pursue Student Affairs as a career, and how interactions with Student Affairs professionals played a part in their decision making.

*Key words:* Student Affairs, Involvement, Career Development, Career Exploration, Mentors, College Student Development

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

When asked what they want to be when they grow up, children may say they wish to become firefighters, ballerinas, or professional athletes. “Children develop their interests and values through interaction with family members, teachers, the media, and peers, which in turn has an impact on their broad ideas about work, their career interests, and decisions in later life” (Porfeli & Lee, 2012, p. 20). Children don’t often dream of becoming a Student Affairs professional, and it usually isn’t part of the conversation about career options in middle or high school (Blimling, 2002). The decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs usually doesn’t happen until entering a post-secondary educational institution. While in college, only 20% of a student’s time is spent in class (Sohn, 2008). The other 80% may involve sleep, meals, work, social interactions, or becoming involved in activities on campus such as intramural athletics, leadership roles, study abroad, or student clubs and organizations. It has been found that these co-curricular activities and interactions enhance students’ development and knowledge, and lead to a richer college experience (Astin, 1993). Through this co-curricular involvement, they may be introduced to Student Affairs professionals, as well as Student Affairs as a career field.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

As an undergraduate student I was very involved in extracurricular activities through the orientation programs, the university programming board, and my fraternity. It was here that I had my first interactions with Student Affairs professionals. These professional advisors guided me throughout my college experience, not only in regards to

my positions in those organizations but in many aspects outside of their job requirements. They quickly became mentors that I could go to for assistance with a problem pertaining to my position or my personal life. It was not only this unconditional support that made me look up to them, but also how much they enjoyed their careers and how rewarding it was for them to do what they did.

I was first introduced to the career of Student Affairs through a fellow student who had chosen to change her career path from psychology to pursue a graduate degree in Student Affairs at my undergraduate institution. Speaking with her, I knew the profession was something I would most certainly enjoy. As I conducted research on the career field and discussed it with my mentors, the idea of pursuing this profession became an increasing interest. Although I was still hesitant about such a drastic career change, I was confident that I had the skill, the aptitude, and most importantly, the passion for this profession. In November of my senior year, I was invited by the Vice President of Student Affairs at my institution to attend the regional NASPA Conference, where I was able to talk to graduate students and professionals in Student Affairs. After this amazing experience, I knew that a career in Student Affairs is what I was meant to do. Through this study, I hoped to learn how others entered the field of Student Affairs and how their experiences compared to my own.

The purpose of this study was to understand what effect undergraduate experiences have on students' choice to pursue a career in Student Affairs. This was explored through studying three groups of individuals: current Student Affairs professionals, current graduate students enrolled in a single Student Affairs preparation program, and current undergraduate students planning to pursue a career in Student

Affairs. This study sought to explore what undergraduate experiences influenced an individual's decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs and how those experiences led to the decision to make this career choice. The results of this study provide insight into how undergraduate experiences can influence the decision to choose a career in Student Affairs.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

RQ1: Who or what are prominent influences on an individual's decision to choose Student Affairs as a career path?

RQ2: What role do mentors play, if any, in the development of a career path, especially in selecting a career in Student Affairs?

RQ3: What was/is the motivation for pursuing a career in Student Affairs?

### **Significance of the Study**

The proposed study is significant because the Student Affairs field is a developing field just over 75 years in progress (ACE, 1937). In his article, *Educating the whole student: The growing academic importance of Student Affairs*, Sandeen (2004) stated:

...many institutions now understand and support the contributions that student involvement, leadership, student-faculty engagement, and community-service programs can make to improving student learning. Finding ways to get students more involved with faculty, creating student-learning communities, and encouraging students to participate in group projects thus have all become natural activities for Student Affairs staff. (p. 31)

Because of this increasing need for administrators outside of the classroom, it is important to explore what influenced previous and current students to pursue a Student Affairs career.

### **Limitations of the Study**

All information was collected from undergraduate students, graduate students, and professionals with one institution in common. The conclusions reached may have been influenced by the nature or culture of the institution. However, to account for some differentiation the interviewees selected were from a variety of areas of study and work.

There is a potential limitation in the participants providing inaccurate information about their experiences. An example of this is present in Bowman and Hill's study (2011) examining potential biases in college student self-reported gains. Through this study, the researchers found that the legitimacy of college self-reported gains among first-year students is questionable (Bowman & Hill, 2011). This shows the importance of considering participant bias when studying certain groups of individuals.

In choosing to do a qualitative study, there is a risk of researcher bias. I am currently working to complete a master's degree in College Student Affairs, after which, I plan to enter the Student Affairs career field as a professional. As stated previously, my interactions with Student Affairs professionals when I was an undergraduate student influenced my decision to pursue this career. Thus, my current position is similar to the group of individuals included in the sample. In recognizing and maintaining awareness of this fact, I have ensured that any personal experiences and biases have not impacted the results of the study.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Graduate Student:** A student currently enrolled in a graduate-level program, pursuing a master's degree.

**Graduate Program in Student Affairs:** A graduate program designed to educate and prepare students for a career in Student Affairs.

**Involvement:** "Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 518).

**New Professional:** "First-time, full-time Student Affairs staff with five or fewer years of experience" (Renn & Hodges, 2007, p. 367)

**Mentor:** "Individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward mobility and career support to their protégés" (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000, p. 1177).

**Student Affairs:** "Any advising, counseling, management, or administrative function at a college or university that exists outside the classroom" (Love, 2003, p. 1).

**Undergraduate Student:** A student currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at a college or university and pursuing a bachelor's degree.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 provided detailed information discussing the purpose of the study, to understand what effect undergraduate experiences have on students' choice to pursue a career in Student Affairs. Research questions were developed to guide and provide a focus for the areas of examination throughout the rest of the study. The significance of the study, limitations, and definitions of terms followed to set the precedents and

boundaries in which this study would be conducted. Chapter 2 will create a better understanding of the topic being examined through a detailed review of literature relating to student development in college, undergraduate student involvement, career development, career exploration, and mentor relationships. This will provide a basis for the methodology used in the study, as discussed in Chapter 3, and the interpretation of the results found, as discussed in Chapter 4 and 5.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides a detailed review of the literature relating to topics including undergraduate student involvement, career development, career exploration, and mentor relationships with Student Affairs professionals. For most individuals, career development is a continual process of making decisions between many occupations available in our society under the influence of several factors such as family, personal views, and societal context (Brown, Brooks, & Associates, 1990). The decision to become a Student Affairs professional can be linked to many possible influences.

#### **Student Development in College**

While attending an institution, students not only gain knowledge inside the classroom, but they also grow and develop as individuals in a variety of ways. Sanford (1967) defined *development* as “the organization of increasing complexity; positive growth process in which the individual becomes increasingly able to integrate an act on many different experiences and influences” (p. 47). This is what happens to students as they become more involved – they are being exposed to increasingly complex and intricate areas of student affairs. This phenomenon may occur throughout one’s life, but as Sanford also stated, it is a different process than simple *change* or *growth*, either of which could have positive or negative effects on the individual.

Rodgers (1990) focused on those attending institutions with his definition of *student development*, “The ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her development capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education” (p. 27). It goes beyond enrollment with students considering careers in student affairs to

involvement and commitment to the institution and the people they interact with at the institution. He also discussed that *student development* is a philosophy that guides Student Affairs professionals and is a basis for particular programs and services in their “concern for the development of the whole person” (Rogers, 1990, p. 27).

Miller and Prince (1976) stated that student development is “the application of human development concepts in postsecondary settings so that everyone involved can master increasingly complex developmental tasks, achieve self-direction, and become interdependent” (p. 3). Through mastering increasingly complex tasks related to student leadership, involvement, and so on they are becoming self-directed and independent, and at the same time learning about these careers in student affairs. The development that students go through happens in many different ways and professionals have conducted a vast amount of research into these different ways students develop (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2009). Through their research, those professionals have established many different theories relating to specific areas of student development, including, but not limited to, psychosocial, intellectual, moral, ethical, cognitive-structural, and many aspects of identity development, as well as theories pertaining to different forms of learning and transition (Evans et al., 2009).

***Marcia’s Ego Identity Statuses.*** One specific theory relates to this study more directly, and that is Marcia’s Ego Identity Statuses. As stated in *Student Development in College* (Evans et al., 2009), Marcia’s theory focuses on how young adults experience and resolve crises, as it relates to identity development. The two important variables examined in this theory are exploration, or crisis, and commitment. *Crisis* refers to the individual questioning their values and goals as defined by their parents and weighing



different potential alternatives and the possible repercussions they may have (as cited in Evans et al., 2009). While experiencing this crisis, individuals “seek out resources such as trusted others (teachers, friends) to explore their options, preferably those with knowledge of the crisis” (as cited in Evans et al., 2009, p. 52) and may work to gain more knowledge through classes, books, or journal writing to make an informed decision. *Commitment* involves the individual claiming ownership of the decided choices, values or goals (as cited in Evans et al., 2009). Once solidifying their commitment, they begin making deliberate and confident decisions based on those choices, values or goals and take action to move themselves closer to fulfilling them. Marcia (as cited in Evans et al., 2009) developed four distinct, non-sequential statuses that describe the different ways in which individuals react to crises, including foreclosure, moratorium, identity achievement, and diffusion.

In the *Foreclosure* status, individuals are committed to the values set forth by their parents without question and have not encountered a crisis because authorities have overseen the direction of their path (as cited in Evans et al., 2009). Individuals in this status remain here until those authorities are no longer there. These individuals are generally inflexible and are unable to adapt to changes without an authority directing them. Many students may be in the Foreclosure status prior to coming to college, while they are still living under the structure and guidance of high school and their parents. It is not until they come to college when those authorities no longer oversee their daily lives that they move out of this stage.

In *Moratorium*, individuals have a crisis that causes them to actively question the values set by their parents in order to form their identity, but do not commit to a new

identity of their own. They are often seen as “either sensitive or anxiety-ridden, highly ethical or self-righteous, flexible or vacillating” (as cited in Evans et al., 2009, p. 53) which occurs as they struggle to decide whether to resist or conform to authority. These individuals “shift between indecisiveness and ambivalence toward authority on one hand and creativity and engaging style on the other” (as cited in Evans et al., 2009, p. 53). This may be seen in a student who is highly involved and exposed to the field of Student Affairs and asks questions about what it is like to work in the field, but does not change from their career path to go into Student Affairs.

Individuals in the state of *Diffusion* have not experienced a significant crisis, and are unable to commit to an identity. They often portray a lack of concern pertaining to a commitment to their identity. “They simply ‘go with the flow,’ taking no account of consequences (positive or negative) that may affect them personally” (as cited in Evans et al., 2009, p. 54). These individuals are often easily manipulated and are more likely to surrender to conformity. Students in this status are most likely not the ones to pursue a career in Student Affairs. They may be uninvolved or their parents may have told them where to go to college and they aren’t interested in participating in extracurricular activities.

*Identity Achievement* comes after a long time of crisis that involves exploring different alternatives and making critical decisions and eventually leads to making a strong commitment and setting goals to establish a strong basis for their future actions. These individuals are able to clearly articulate their values and decisions and “choose their own path in life” (as cited in Evans et al., 2009, p. 54). Students in this status are usually those who have experienced a significant crisis that has caused them to explore

other career options. In their exploration, they discover an interest in the field of Student Affairs and make a commitment to pursuing it as their own career.

### **Undergraduate Student Involvement**

Many students are first introduced to Student Affairs as a career option during their undergraduate experiences through cocurricular activities in which they are involved or staff members with whom they interact (Blimling, 2002). According to Astin's (1999) Involvement Theory five claims can be made about student involvement. The first claim stated that involvement relates to "the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects" (Astin, 1999, p. 519). These objects can range from very general concepts, such as a student's overall experience, to very specific, such as planning a certain event. Astin's second claim stated that "involvement occurs along a continuum" (p. 519). Different students may have varying levels of involvement in a certain organization. For example, one student may be greatly invested in a literature club but another student is only a member of the club for extra credit. Also, a single student may have varying levels of involvement in different organizations at different times throughout their college experience. A student may enjoy Literature Club more than Intramural Sports in his first year but later in his college experience, he is more invested in Intramural Sports.

Astin's (1999) third claim stated, "Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features." (p. 519). For example, a student's involvement in academics could be measured quantitatively by the number of hours the student spends on homework, studying and preparing for class. The student's academic involvement could also be measured qualitatively through analyzing if the student is reviewing and comprehending

the assigned reading or is just staring blankly at the book while his mind wanders. A student's undergraduate experience is made up of both qualitative and quantitative features. The fourth claim stated, "The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program" (Astin, 1999, p. 519). For instance, in the example stated in the third claim, students will learn and develop more extensively if they are actively engaged in their studies than they would staring at the book and daydreaming. Finally, the fifth and final claim stated, "The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (p. 519). An academic course would not be as effective in educating students if it did not require students to attend class.

Astin (1999) continued, "The extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains" (p. 522). Students have a limited amount of time and energy to devote to their tasks. Therefore students must decide where to allocate their available time based on their own interests. For example, if a student studying English literature wishes to become better versed in the practices and knowledge of English literature, that student may dedicate more time to discussions with English professors outside the classroom, attending book reading events, joining student organizations relating to English literature and other activities to help in this endeavor. "The extent to which students reach this goal is a direct function of the time they spend at such activities" (Astin, p. 522). The same can be said for a student considering a career in Student Affairs. A student who enjoys planning programs through the student activities

office and begins to consider pursuing it as a career may ask his supervisors questions about the career field. Because of their interest in Student Affairs as a potential career, students may end up spending more and more time working with the office or shadowing their supervisors to learn as much as they can about what that career might be like and how they can get there.

Involvement during undergraduate study benefits students in a variety of ways. In one study, researchers looked at the correlation between level of involvement and academic success of college students and found that a moderate amount of cocurricular involvement can have a very positive impact on academic success (Huang & Chang, 2004). Becoming involved in cocurricular activities may also help students further develop and build skills. Pascarella and Terenzini (2009) stated, “Development or change is not merely the consequence of college’s impact on a student but rather a function of the quality of student effort or involvement with the resources provided by the institution” (p. 54).

Similarly, in Kuh’s (2009) in-depth analysis of the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE), he stated, “The greatest impact on learning and personal development during college seems to be a function of institutional policies and practices that induce higher levels of engagement across various kinds of in-class and out-of-class educationally purposeful activities” (p. 688). Students’ development during college is based not only on their involvement within the classroom, but on all involvement that takes place both in and out of academic pursuits during their time at an institution.

This development and growth through involvement often is the first introduction students get to the concept of Student Affairs. “College life also presents opportunities

for acquiring realistic knowledge of available roles, and for imagining oneself in them” (Sanford, 1966, p. 282). Through involvement in cocurricular activities and interactions with current Student Affairs professionals, students are able to get a glimpse of what it might be like for them to become Student Affairs professionals and what responsibilities and skills may be required of them. Students who become more involved on campus may find an interest in Student Affairs as a potential career. This may lead to developing professional skills or competencies through conferences, leadership opportunities, training, and so on. If students decide to pursue a career in Student Affairs, they can further establish their skill set through their cocurricular activities and training opportunities along with discussions with Student Affairs professionals to begin developing these competencies.

### **Career Development**

There are many factors that contribute to students’ decisions for their career paths. One of these is the student’s personality. In a study which looked at the link between students’ personality types, college expectations, and their selection of an academic major, researchers found that these links are prominently present in both academic and social areas (Pike, 2006). For example, social students are expected to interact frequently with a diverse group of students, and artistic students are expected to experience artistic and cultural activities. This relates to John Holland’s Theory of Vocational Choice (1973), which implies that individuals tend to seek out work environments that are consistent with their own personality type. This theory describes both the work environment and the individual falling usually under one of six major themes: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (Holland, 1973). Work

satisfaction and increased productivity will be found when there is congruence between the two. Individuals seek to work in an environment that will allow them to use their skills and abilities, and express their thoughts and values, as they take on the challenges and roles of the position.

Another factor is the potential salary in that career field. Berrett (2012) examined the links between academic majors, college selections, and starting salaries, and referred to several studies that investigated starting wages for new graduates. This information could be a strong incentive for some students to pursue certain careers. Careers in Student Affairs are generally not high earning positions. According to the 2011-12 Mid-Level Administrative and Professional Salary Survey Executive Summary conducted by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (2012), the median salary for mid-level administrators and professionals in Student Affairs, not including healthcare providers, is between \$30,000 and \$48,000 a year. For this reason, individuals pursuing this career path should have a strong passion for working with students and being on a college campus over financial gain.

Parental influence could also be a factor for students' career decisions. In a study at a large, Midwest institution, Pearson and Dellman-Jenkins (1997) surveyed 655 incoming freshman students to explore the educational background of the students' parents and the influence they had on the students' decisions regarding a college major. The study found that parents have surprisingly little impact on students' career decisions. However, in a national study surveying more than 3,000 students at 72 colleges across the country, researchers investigated the impact of certain undergraduate experiences and parental socialization on undergraduates' career choices (Weidman, 1984). This study

found more specific data showing that while there was very little influence of parental socialization on changes in career choice later in students' college years, there were strong parental influences at entrance to college (Weidman, 1984). This suggests that parents become less and less influential on their children's career decision making process as they move away and are out on their own.

Many factors that may influence students' decisions to pursue a career in Student Affairs consist of those over which they have no control. According to the Happenstance Learning Theory developed by John Krumboltz (2009), "The situations in which individuals find themselves are partly a function of factors over which they have no control and partly a function of actions that the individuals have initiated themselves" (p. 135). This combination of planned and unplanned actions creates a complex web of unpredictable outcomes, which Krumboltz labeled as *happenstance*. He goes on to discuss his personal interaction with happenstance, listing his 24 previous occupations over the course of his lifetime thus far, ranging from an elevator operator to a military officer. It would be impossible to predict the pattern of occupations individuals have throughout their life. The decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs could also be the result of such happenstance, through the planned and unplanned actions students initiate throughout their childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood that lead them to this career.

### **Career Exploration**

Another factor that impacts students' career decisions is the experiences they have in and out of the classroom while at college that could change their decision of career path. Howe and Ives (2001) investigated the effect of experiences in community medical



facilities on medical students' career preference. They found that community-based experiences strongly influenced students who were previously interested in hospital-based care to alter their career choices to focus on community care. In a study investigating the impact of a student entrepreneur experience program on students' career choices (Woodier-Harris, 2010), researchers interviewed 15 students three months after completing the program, discussing the influence the program had on their career decision-making. Findings revealed that the majority of the students (73%) stated that the program empowered them to start their own business. One student stated, "If it wasn't for the experience I would not have figured out where my passions lie and would probably still be dabbling in different careers and different business ideas, never getting me very far" (Woodier-Harris, 2010, p. 470). Conversely, another student who completed the program stated, "I learned for the first time how to explore my ideas further and as a result this gave me the opportunity to explore what I really wanted to do for a career and being in business was not for me" (Woodier-Harris, 2010, p. 470). Students' exposure to experiential learning opportunities while in college can have very strong effects on their professional aspirations and even cause them to alter their previous career path.

### **Mentor Relationships**

Another area where the Student Affairs career field may be introduced is through mentoring relationships with Student Affairs professionals. Mentoring usually consists of an informal relationship "between a more mature and experienced individual and one who is undergoing transition into a field of endeavor or to a more advanced level of responsibility within a chosen profession" (Cooper & Miller, 1998, p. 57). When

working with students, Student Affairs professionals may become mentors through their assistance in the student's transition into that position. Mentoring usually isn't an official responsibility of a supervisor, but a relationship developed through helping a less experienced staff member to "learn the ropes" in a new or different role (Schmidt & Wolfe, 2009). Functioning as the student's consultant or advisor, Student Affairs professionals help the student learn the politics of the office, or the "dynamics of making policy in contrast to implementing policy or policy administration" (Schmidt & Wolf, 2009, p. 374). This may be just within that particular office or throughout multiple offices throughout the university, dealing with not only explicitly stated rules and policies, but also informal, unspoken procedures (Schmidt & Wolf, 2009).

Student Affairs professionals also serve as consultants through helping students set and meet professional standards through the identification and planning of goals, offering constructive criticism or suggestions and giving an alternative frame of reference by which to evaluate the students' work (2009). This helps students learn how to objectively gauge their success and recognize traits that will produce quality performance. While success in the workplace is important, another aspect of Student Affairs professionals advising students is to support and encourage students to find a healthy balance between their personal and work responsibilities. Being new to an office or organization, students may experience internal conflict in maintaining this balance, which could damage their professional achievement, such as fear of failure, low self-esteem, and ambivalence toward success (2009). As a mentor, the Student Affairs professional serves as an example of successful equilibrium, drawing on their own experiences with this struggle to provide advice and support for the student (2009).

Having a mentor throughout college benefits students in many ways including increased academic performance and productivity, professional confidence, networking, and identity development, professional skill development, and greater satisfaction with programs or institutions and assistance in securing their first job (Johnson, 2007). In this regard, the mentor acts “as a sponsor or ‘door opener’ using connections with others in the field to promote the professional development of the protégé” (Schmidt & Wolfe, 2009, p. 376). In one study, researchers interviewed graduating seniors at a larger, east-coast institution, asking them to reflect on their experiences at college, both in and out of class. The study revealed that mentor relationships which transpire outside of class, not for course credit, have a clear positive impact on students (Light, 2001). This mutually beneficial relationship has a strong possibility of sparking students’ interest in pursuing a career in Student Affairs. “Most people enter Student Affairs work because of student leadership positions they held as undergraduates and because of relationships they establish with Student Affairs professionals who supported them as undergraduates” (Blimling, 2002, p. 28).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed review of the literature, discussing several factors that could influence a student’s decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs. These areas include their involvement as an undergraduate, how they developed their career aspirations and choices, the mentor relationships they formed with Student Affairs professionals, and opportunities they had to explore different career paths. Using the first two chapters as a foundation, Chapter 3 will describe the methodology utilized in this

study, the individuals who participated in the study, and how the data gathered will be collected and interpreted to answer the research questions from Chapter 1.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to understand what effect undergraduate experiences have on students' choice to pursue a career in Student Affairs. This was explored through studying three groups of individuals: current Student Affairs professionals, current graduate students enrolled in a single Student Affairs preparation program, and current undergraduate students considering a career in Student Affairs. Because of the nature of this study, a qualitative approach was selected, as this allowed me to examine individuals' experiences and the path they took to Student Affairs. This was achieved through individual interviews with each of the participants, discussing various topics regarding their undergraduate experiences.

#### **Design of the Study**

A qualitative approach was utilized for this study, specifically the use of individual interviews. "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.3). The path to a career in Student Affairs is a journey full of experiences unique to each individual. A qualitative approach is the best method for this study because it tries to "...fully understand the essence of some phenomenon" (McMillan, 2008, p. 12). The individual interviews were intended to allow the participants to describe their experience as an undergraduate student through open-ended questions (Appendix A) guiding the conversation. The interviews were focused on the topics of the individuals' undergraduate experiences, the mentor relationships they

developed, and their interest in the Student Affairs career field as an undergraduate, as well as their motivations to pursue this career field.

### **Participants**

A purposive sample was used to select nine participants consisting of the following:

1. Three new professionals in Student Affairs with one to five years of experience
2. Three current graduate students enrolled in a Student Affairs preparation program with plans to become Student Affairs professionals
3. Three current undergraduate upperclassmen students seeking a career in Student Affairs.

“Purposive sampling operates on the principle that we can get the best information through focusing on a relatively small number of instances deliberately selected on the basis of their known attributes” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 34). Because of the specificity of the experiences being examined, this sampling technique was the most beneficial to the study. The participants were selected through discussion with the faculty sponsor to ensure participants work in a variety of departments in Student Affairs and come from a variety of backgrounds. New professionals were selected from the recent alumni of a single Student Affairs graduate program. Graduate students were selected from the first year cohort of the same graduate program. Undergraduate students were selected from a group of upperclassmen students involved in a Student Affairs preparatory program at the same institution. All participants were selected from a single institution in an effort to maintain the consistency in the graduate education of the sample. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate in individual interviews and were given an informed consent form

(Appendix B). Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any point with no consequence.

**Undergraduate Student Participants.**

*Alan.* Alan is a Caucasian male in his senior year of undergraduate education at the institution. He immediately got involved in his residence hall through Hall Council and the Residence Hall Association, and then branched out to serving on the Student Senate as a Student Senator. Throughout his time at the institution, he became more and more involved at deeper levels of administrative offices. He was asked to serve on several university committees, interned in Admissions and the President's office, worked in the New Student Programs office, and served on the National Board of Directors of the National Collegiate Honors Council. Through these experiences, he was introduced to many administrators in Student Affairs, developed a strong interest in the profession, and during his junior year, he decided to pursue a career in Student Affairs. Upon graduation, Alan plans to attend a graduate school for a Master's degree in a Student Affairs program, after which, he plans to work in the Admissions office of a higher education institution.

*Brian.* Brian is an African-American male in his sophomore year of undergraduate education at the institution. He got involved in Hall Council and the Residence Hall Association in his first semester and after attending a Residence Life conference (GLACURH), Brian was immediately interested in Residence Life. In his second semester as an undergraduate, he attended the Disney College Program where he worked in the attractions. Sophomore year he began to question his current career path, pursuing a degree in Math Education, and decided to change. At the same time, he had

started working as a Resident Assistant and deeply enjoyed building personal connections with his residents while helping them become more successful in and out of the classroom. He then decided to pursue a career in Student Affairs and changed his major to one that would complement and help prepare him for the field and decided to double major in Sociology and Psychology. He has already decided to pursue a graduate degree in a Student Affairs program, after which, he plans to work in Residence Life at a higher education institution.

*Cathy.* Cathy is a Caucasian female in her senior year of undergraduate education at the institution. She began serving on the Hall Council Executive Board her freshman year and when a Resident Assistant decided to leave at the end of the semester, she applied to fill the position and was hired for the spring of her freshman year. Cathy had a hard time being a Resident Assistant as a freshman, but decided to return to the position her sophomore year. Toward the end of her sophomore year, Cathy did not enjoy the position and decided not to return as a junior. In her time away from her position as a Resident Assistant, she realized that she did, in fact, enjoy the job and decided to reapply for the position for her senior year. After realizing her love of being a Resident Assistant, Cathy began attending meetings for the Student Affairs Preparatory Program (SAPP) where she was immersed in Student Affairs and many interactions with several Student Affairs graduate students and professionals. Through the program, she also received a mentor who she was able to discuss and ask questions about the profession. Throughout this time she has also been involved in a variety of diversity, social justice, and service committees and organizations as well. These interactions, along with the realization that she missed being a Resident Assistant, helped Cathy find her passion for Student Affairs



and she plans to attend graduate school for a Master's degree in a Student Affairs program, after which, she plans to work in Residence Life at an institution of higher education.

**Graduate Student Participants.**

*Danielle.* Danielle is a Hispanic female currently in her first year of the College Student Affairs graduate program at the institution. She attended a small, public, Midwest institution that is part of a large, multi-campus, public university system throughout the state. Before she even arrived on campus, Danielle found, applied for, and was accepted to a Desk Assistant position in Residence Life. She also got involved with the Latino Student Association and was a Resident Assistant as well. After two years, she decided to transfer to a larger, public, Midwest institution located in a more urban environment. After transferring, Danielle applied to be a Resident Assistant and was accepted to the position. She also got involved in Greek Life through a sorority and joined the Latino Student Association at her new institution, through which she was introduced to several Student Affairs administrators and offices. These organizations and positions gave Danielle an insight into the field of Student Affairs and she decided to participate in the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP) and was paired with a Student Affairs professional at her institution to serve as her mentor. She began discussing with her mentor the different areas in Student Affairs where she would enjoy working and decided to pursue the career. Danielle currently has an assistantship in Residence Life, overseeing the academic and leadership support program. She decided to keep an open mind about where she'd like to work and plans to explore different avenues

of Student Affairs through internships and other involvements over the next year to see where she would like to work after completing her graduate education.

*Erin.* Erin is an African-American female currently in her first year of the College Student Affairs graduate program at the institution. She attended a small, private, religious, liberal arts, Midwest college for her undergraduate education. Erin was involved in Student government, serving as a senator and Vice President of Diversity Affairs. She also was involved in Residence Life as a Resident Assistant and in Black Student Union as a Publicist. During this time Erin also held a part time job and worked in the Registrar's office. Through her studies in Public Relations, she was introduced to the Dean of Students in her college, who became her mentor who she shadowed and questioned about the field of Student Affairs. Erin also participated in community service trips and was connected with the Service-Learning Coordinator at her institution who helped her to develop the skills necessary to plan service trips for other students. She found herself enjoying all of these aspects of her experience, but it was not until her Academic Advisor had a conversation with her about going into the field that she realized all of her previous experiences had prepared her to work in Student Affairs. Before her senior year, Erin assisted with the academic advising of incoming students during summer orientation and realized that helping students was her passion and decided to pursue a career in Student Affairs. She currently has an assistantship in Student Life, where her primary focus is overseeing Student Government. After completing her graduate education, Erin plans to work in Academic Advising or Student Life and would eventually like to become a Vice President of Student Affairs or a Dean of Students.

**Frank.** Frank is a Caucasian male currently in his first year of the College Student Affairs graduate program at the institution. He attended a small, rural, public, Midwestern institution for his undergraduate education. While pursuing a degree in Business, Frank was involved in many organizations. His sophomore year, he became a Tour Guide and joined multiple honors societies as well as a variety of other organizations. He also applied to be a Resident Assistant and was offered the position for his junior year. He established close relationships to the individuals he met through this position, including his Hall Director who became a mentor to him through his position. Frank taught a first-year experience course with a colleague during the first eight weeks of school for three years. Frank also had a summer internship planning the new student orientation for his undergraduate institution prior to his senior year. In this position, he was able to interact with a wide variety of Student Affairs professionals and collaborate with many offices and departments on campus. Through these many opportunities and the relationships he developed as a result, Frank had immense exposure to the field of Student Affairs and realized that he wanted to work on a college campus in a similar capacity. Upon completion of his graduate education, Frank plans to work in Residence Life, but has many interests in other areas of Student Affairs that he may pursue in the future, including New Student Programs, Student Activities, and Admissions.

**New Professional Participants.**

**Gina.** Gina is a Caucasian female alumnus of the College Student Affairs graduate program at the institution, with over a year of professional experience in Student Affairs. She went to a large public state school for her undergraduate education, where she pursued a degree in Business Marketing. As an undergraduate she was very involved

in her sorority, even serving as president of her group. After graduating, she worked for a sports and entertainment marketing company in Chicago for five years. During this time her dissatisfaction with her work led her to consider other career options, which led to a conversation with a college mentor about Student Affairs. She looked into graduate school options and selected a graduate school program in College Student Affairs. Upon completion of her graduate education, Gina went back to her undergraduate institution where she is currently the Director of Career Services in the College of Media in her second year as a Student Affairs professional.

*Henry.* Henry is a Caucasian male alumnus of the College Student Affairs graduate program at the institution. He completed both his undergraduate and graduate education at the institution. Henry had a unique experience as an undergraduate, in that he completed his education in three years by taking on a heavy load of classes each semester while working multiple jobs to help pay for his education. During his first year, Henry was an Assistant Manager for two different pizza restaurants and worked in the residence hall dining facility, and worked on the concert crew, all while taking several classes. The summer before his sophomore year, Henry began working for Conference Services where he was introduced to Residence Life and decided to join Hall Council that fall as a Representative for the Residence Hall Association. Over the next two years, he continued his work in the Conference Services office, as well as his job in the dining center, where he became Head Manager. Through these experiences, Henry realized that he wanted to pursue a career in Student Affairs and decided to change his major from Vocal Music Education to Communication Studies, focusing on Rhetoric and Public Advocacy with a minor in Music. His senior year, he became the President of the

Residence Hall Association, which helped him to find his interest in leadership. Henry did a large search for graduate school programs, but decided to stay at the institution for his graduate education because it had the experiences and opportunities he desired. Upon completion of his graduate education, Henry was offered a position at a mid-sized, public, Midwest institution, where he was a Hall Director for a time before becoming the Coordinator for Residential Leadership and Engagement in his third year as a professional.

*Isaac.* Isaac is a Middle Eastern male alumnus of the College Student Affairs graduate program at the institution. He completed both his undergraduate and graduate education at the institution. He began as a History major, but found it was not where his interest was, so he changed to English and planned to pursue a degree in Secondary Education. In his second year, Isaac became a Resident Assistant and continued in the position for the remainder of his undergraduate education. In this position, he had two different supervisors discuss with him the field of student affairs and encouraged him to pursue the career, but he was not interested in the profession at the time. In his last year, he went home to student teach but did not enjoy the experience at all. He reflected on his discussions with his supervisors and realized he was, in fact, passionate about the profession of Student Affairs and contacted the institution about entering the graduate program. Coincidentally, there was an opening for the program and he was accepted and went back to the institution for his graduate education. Upon completion, he was offered a position as a Hall Director at a large, public, Midwestern, research university where he is currently in his second year as a professional.

**Site**

The study took place at a mid-sized, public institution with approximately 10,000 students including graduate students, located in the rural Midwest. Individual interviews took place in meeting rooms in the university union, professional offices, or a more convenient location for the participant if they were not able to meet in the union. Each of the nine interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and were documented with two audio recording devices to prevent potential technical issues.

**Instrumentation**

The research project consisted of semi-structured questions (Appendix A) conducted between the researcher and the participant. According to McMillan (2008), “semi structured questions do not have predetermined structured choices. Rather, the question is open-ended yet specific in intent, allowing individual responses” (p. 177). Also, the participant was allowed to add any additional comments or information after each question, including follow-up and clarification questions. Questions were not sent to the participants prior to the interview in an effort to prevent receiving scripted responses. However, participants received a semi-detailed description of the study and topics that would be discussed in the interview via e-mail when asked to participate in the study (Appendix C) in order to give them sufficient time to prepare.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected during the fall of 2013. Prior to the interview, participants were given an informed consent letter (Appendix B) to review and sign. The informed consent document highlights that participation in the study is voluntary and participants can choose to be removed from the study at any point as well as outline the risks and

benefits associated with this study. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded using two personal recording devices in order to create an accurate transcription.

### **Treatment of Data**

After conducting and recording the interviews, each interview was transcribed and interview responses were coded into themed categories for analysis. These themes corresponded with the topics of the individuals' undergraduate experiences, their interest in the Student Affairs career field as an undergraduate, and their motivations to pursue Student Affairs as a career. Identities of all participants were kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms in all forms of documentation and transcription outside of direct communication with the participant. To increase the credibility of the study, the faculty sponsor and another graduate student independently reviewed and coded the transcripts for potential commonalities and other analyses. All information including informed consent forms, audio recordings, transcriptions, participant identities, and written notes were kept, securely stored, and used only by the researcher. Any print-outs of the data made were collected, stored in a locked file cabinet, and will be shredded upon the completion of the thesis.

### **Summary**

This study was designed to investigate how undergraduate experiences and the influence of others lead to a career in Student Affairs as well as the decision making process they went through in choosing this career path. A qualitative design of semi-structured interviews was used to allow participants to explain their experiences and the impact those experiences had on their decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs.

Transcripts of those interviews were analyzed to identify common themes in the participants' experiences.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This chapter provides the results discovered through the analysis of the nine interviews. These themes specifically focused on the three research questions stated in Chapter 1, which are as follows:

RQ1: Who or what are prominent influences on an individual's decision to choose Student Affairs as a career path?

RQ2: What role do mentors play, if any, in the development of a career path, especially in selecting a career in Student Affairs?

RQ3: What was/is the motivation for pursuing a career in Student Affairs?

Participants' responses to the interview questions were analyzed and coded to gain insight from the participants. Through this analysis, certain themes emerged within each of the research questions which have been categorized under topical headings.

#### **Influences on the decision to choose Student Affairs as a career path**

Upon completion of the analysis of the interviews, there was no single person, position, or experience that had the greatest influence on any one of the participants. It is a collection of experiences, over multiple years, varying from person to person, that creates a spark which ignites the passion and drive to pursue a career in Student Affairs.

Isaac, a professional who had wanted to teach high school English, stated,

I think it would be unfair to pick a specific person or a specific moment, because there have been so many people and so many moments in my life that have helped shape me and push me into this profession.

The participants were not aware of the field of Student Affairs before coming to college, and it was not until they were in college that they were exposed to professionals working on a college campus. Once introduced to the field, students may begin to observe, question, and seek out opportunities to interact and gain more exposure to Student Affairs. Henry, who worked several jobs as an undergrad, when asked if he remembers when he first discovered the field of Student Affairs and began considering the field as a possible career exclaimed “I know the moment.” Henry then recalled the time as an undergraduate when he was working in Conference Services over the summer when he was working a linen-washing shift with a graduate student in Residence Life:

I remember very clearly asking, “What do you do? I don’t understand.” She explained the running of the hall and what she wanted to do in the field. I thought, “This is exactly what I want to be doing.” I pestered her the rest of the summer, asking about the field and what that meant.

The participants, through their interviews, shared stories of their experiences that provided some commonalities regarding where those sparks happened during their undergraduate and post-undergraduate experiences.

**Undergraduate Involvement.** In the selection of participants for this study, I attempted to include individuals from various backgrounds. While the participants represent a diverse group of individuals from different areas of Student Affairs, eight of the nine participants were, at some point, involved in Residence Life as an undergraduate student, either through a leadership position or employment. This phenomenon may be due to the fact that Residence Life is an area of campus where there is the greatest concentration of opportunities for students to get involved, serve in leadership positions,

and develop mentorships with their peers and professionals. Cathy, the undergraduate student involved in the Student Affairs Prep Program (SAPP) stated, “I got involved in Hall Council because I wanted to do leadership type things.” Gina, the professional who worked in marketing for five years, explained her motivation for joining a Business Fraternity, stating, “I used it more for professional development and learning how to work in the business world.” Even though there was a strong connection to Residence Life among the participants, there was a wide variety of involvement in other organizations as well. Further information about their undergraduate involvement discussed in this study is provided below (Table 1). Danielle, the graduate student involved in NUFP, stated “Working at the Front Desk was a lot of seeing behind the scenes of what happens in Housing.” The participants’ involvement not only helped them develop as individuals, but it provided them with opportunities to interact with Student Affairs professionals, explore and develop their career path, and gain insight into what it is like to work in Student Affairs. Brian explained that the Disney College Program “helped me to grow as an independent individual. It helped me think critically in different situations.”

### **Interactions with Student Affairs professionals**

Through their positions in organizations and connections with offices around campus, the participants were able to have meaningful interactions with professionals in Student Affairs. Over the course of their time in their positions, these interactions the participants had evolved into relationships where their supervisors became personal and professional mentors who helped to guide them throughout their undergraduate experience. Every single participant discussed a variety of interactions with Student

Table 1.  
*Participant Undergraduate Involvement*

Position/Organization	Participants Involved <i>n</i> (%)
Housing Staff Position (Resident Assistant, Desk Assistant, etc.)	7(78%)
Hall Council/Residence Hall Association	6(67%)
Work in Student Affairs Administrative Offices	4(44%)
Minority and Ethnic Organizations	4(44%)
University Committees	3(33%)
Political and Social Action groups	3(33%)
Academic/Honorary Organizations	2(22%)
Off-Campus internship	2(22%)
Regional/National Conferences	2(22%)
Social Fraternities or Sororities	2(22%)
Student Affairs Undergraduate Organization	2(22%)
Other	2(22%)

Affairs professionals on different levels. Danielle stated, “Getting to meet people in different departments like the Multicultural Success Center at [UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTION], having those interactions with different key people helped me find my passion in Student Affairs.” Cathy discussed how her involvement with SAPP had an influence on her decision:

A big thing that stood out to me was when I started going to the Student Affairs Prep Program, last year and just being immersed in it with professionals and grads. To see their passion, I thought, “Alright, this is what I know I should be doing.”

***Supervisory Roles.*** Students who choose to engage in on-campus organizations and employment opportunities are often directly supervised by Student Affairs professionals. All of the participants mentioned direct supervisors in at least one of their positions having a significant impact on their decision to pursue a degree in Student Affairs. This influence can occur in a variety of ways. Erin, the graduate student in

Student Life, shadowed her supervisor to further understand her position, “Following what she did, I saw behind the scenes, how she creates a great experience for [STUDENTS].” Several participants had this same curiosity about what Student Affairs really is and sought out the answers through discussions with their supervisors or simply observing them at work. Danielle said one thing that led her into this profession was “watching my mentor or other Student Affairs professionals on campus, seeing what they did and how much of an impact they can make.”

***Collaboration and connections.*** In many areas of student involvement during college students may have the opportunity to connect with Student Affairs professionals, collaborating with them on projects or events in their current positions or connecting with them for other possible areas of involvement such as university committees, focus groups, or internships. Frank discussed how working in the summer orientation office gave him this opportunity:

I was able to do my internship planning our new student orientation the summer prior to my senior year and that was another opportunity to interact with many people in Student Affairs and work with a lot of different offices on campus.

Students engaging in these interactions and opportunities will lead professionals toward approaching the student to get involved in other ways. Alan, the undergraduate student interested in Admissions, stated, "I was asked to serve on several university committees and started meeting some administrators and fellow students that were doing some of the same things and from those experiences I just continuously got more involved."

**Motivators on the Decision to Pursue Student Affairs**

Students involved in organizations and departments on campus are given the opportunity to gain experiences very similar to those of a Student Affairs professional. These paraprofessional experiences provide opportunities for students to further understand and experience what it is like to work as a Student Affairs professional, which could have a significant influence on their decision to pursue the career. Alan discussed his work in Admissions as having this significant influence:

I think the first time and the times since that I was able to give campus tours that I was able to meet individually with families and prospective students and parents, the first times that I was able to represent the institution at a college fair or at a high school visit, it was those moments that really sold me on Student Affairs.

Brian had a similar encounter as a Resident Assistant when one of his residents was having trouble deciding his career path as well as his involvement during college. He was able to sit down and have developmental conversations with the student, introduce him to different opportunities for involvement and help him find his way through college. Frank had the opportunity to teach an eight-week first-year seminar class alongside a professional for three years as an undergraduate student. Cathy stated her position as a Resident Assistant had a large impact on her career choice, sharing, "Being in that role was kind of the starter for the rest of what I want to do." Gina gained applicable experience during her term as President of her sorority,

There were times that I had to deal with things that I didn't want to deal with.

There were times that I had to take friends in front of the Honor Board because they weren't upholding the rules of living in the house or their grades were

struggling and they needed to be put on probation until they brought their grades up.

Erin had the opportunity to gain real world experience of a Student Affairs professional through her work with the summer student orientation and registration days at her undergraduate institution. During these days she assisted in the academic advising of incoming students and helped them register for classes. These experiences they had as undergraduate students were just a small taste of what Student Affairs work is like.

**Career Development and Exploration.** Through students' involvement during college and their opportunities to interact with and experience the work of a Student Affairs professional, students began to further explore Student Affairs as a career option and choose to pursue it for their own career.

***Moment of Realization.*** After discovering the field of Student Affairs, all nine participants, at some point, had a moment of realization, where they reflected on their experience and made the decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs. This experience led to them becoming motivated to pursue this career path. What caused these moments of realization and how they processed it varied between each of the participants, but that moment of realization was described by every participant.

Isaac was approached by his supervisor who encouraged him to go into Student Affairs, "but I never really took that to heart. I thought that was something Student Affairs professionals did for everyone that worked for them." However, when he went home to complete his student teaching, he did not enjoy his experience and "I wanted to be back on a college campus helping college students. That light bulb went off about my supervisor saying 'This would be good for you.'"

Alan was determined to be a history teacher since he was young, but he had a feeling that teaching was not what he was being called to do. His involvements introduced him to the field of Student Affairs but he did not want to admit that he no longer wanted to teach “So I spent three years as an education major because I was unwilling to say that I wasn’t going to be a teacher, because I spent so many years saying that I was.” Then during his junior year, Alan realized that he was in denial. “I finally made the decision that Student Affairs was it. I was done lying to myself, and I decided that Student Affairs was what I wanted to go into.”

When Brian decided he no longer wanted to be a math teacher, he thought about possible career options. Knowing that “I still wanted to go into that mentoring, teaching type of field,” Brian talked to his supervisors about what their jobs entail. “I decided to look into Student Affairs more and see the different areas you can go into in Student Affairs.” At the same time, he had a resident who was struggling to find his own career path and where to get involved on campus. Helping the student work through his problems helped Brian to realize that what he was doing was Student Affairs work and he enjoyed what he was doing. After having more discussions and researching the profession on his own, Brian decided that this was a field he wanted to pursue.

Danielle started her college education as a business major, but after two years, realized “I don’t really see myself doing this for the rest of my life.” Around this same time, she discovered that Student Affairs was a career and realized, “I could see myself working at a university and doing something, I didn’t know exactly what, but I could definitely see myself doing it.” After transferring to her second undergraduate institution,



she began talking with professionals and mentors about “What are the different umbrellas or departments Student Affairs have and what are the different possibilities for me.”

Cathy was “at a crossroads” with her major, speech pathology, because she did not have the GPA to get into a graduate program, so she decided to reevaluate her career choice. Her year away from being a Resident Assistant made her realize that she missed having that student interaction and helping others. She thought through different avenues where she could have that experience and realized, “I can do that in Student Affairs. It doesn’t have to be housing. It could be somewhere else.” This realization helped her to refocus her efforts and discover her enthusiasm for leadership and working with students.

Through her involvement with academic advising and the Dean of Students, Erin was given many tasks that gave her a glimpse in to the work of Student Affairs professionals, but she was unaware of its existence as a career option until she had a conversation with her supervisor who said, “You know what I think you should get into? College Student Affairs.” She then began shadowing her supervisors and asking them about their positions. Reflecting on her other involvements on campus and her interest in helping others, Erin realized that, “I was doing College Student Affairs my entire life and didn’t realize it.”

Frank was aware of the field of Student Affairs through his numerous involvements on campus, but was not interested in pursuing the career until his junior year. He began thinking about what aspects of his experience he had enjoyed most, “I just loved working in that environment and I loved what I was doing as an RA. The more I got into it the more I was able to see the ins and outs of it and everything.” Frank then had the opportunity to attend a Student Affairs job placement fair as a junior to see what

it was like and it was that experience that made him realize that Student Affairs was what he wanted to do.

Gina was unaware of Student Affairs as a career field throughout her entire undergraduate experience. She graduated and worked in Marketing in Chicago for five years, but after becoming burnt out from all of the traveling required in her position, she began reevaluating her career aspirations. Gina happened to be back on campus at her undergraduate institution when she realized “You know, I really like being on a college campus and working with students.” She met with her old mentor to discuss future career possibilities and he encouraged Gina to pursue a career in Student Affairs.

Henry began his college experience as a Music Education major but quickly realized that “I enjoyed music for me and learning how to teach other people about music was not what I enjoyed at all.” At the same time, he became involved in Residence Life and realized Student Affairs was what he was interested in and began trying to find a major to compliment his career choice. “I literally looked through all of the different majors and identified four or five that seemed like they would relate well to Student Affairs.”

**Gap Time.** In some instances, these realizations about the world of Student Affairs work on the college campus come when students left the collegiate environment and were able to reflect on their past experience. Three of the participants had this phenomena occur. Isaac left the college atmosphere to return home for student teaching, but he didn’t enjoy what he was doing. Cathy decided not to apply to be a Resident Assistant for her junior year. During that time, she found that something was missing and turned back to her involvement in Student Affairs. “The experience of living off

campus and not being involved in anything made me realize that, stepping back and looking at it from a different perspective, I realized ‘I really missed this.’” Gina left college after graduating and was a working professional in Marketing for five years, but after becoming burnt out, she returned to campus and reflected on her experience, realizing she wanted to work on a college campus and interact with students once more.

### **Summary**

Through their involvement on campus the participants were able to gain hands-on experience doing Student Affairs work. This taste of what it could be like to work in the Student Affairs field interested them, and in several cases, caused them to begin asking their connections to the Student Affairs world questions about what it is like to be a Student Affairs professional, exploring the possibility of themselves working in the field. Without these experiences the participants had through their involvement, the participants may not have chosen to pursue Student Affairs as a career, or even discovered it at all.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter will explain what effects undergraduate experiences have on students' choice to pursue a career in Student Affairs, based on the data gathered from the three groups of participants: current Student Affairs professionals, current graduate students enrolled in a single Student Affairs preparation program, and current undergraduate students planning to pursue a career in Student Affairs. This will be fulfilled by summarizing the information found in the participants' interviews and forming conclusions on the significance of this data and how it can be utilized by current and future Student Affairs professionals.

#### **Discussion**

This study explored the influences on students' decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs, the mentor relationships Student Affairs professionals formed with students, and the students' motivations to pursue Student Affairs as a career. These areas were studied first through examining students' areas of involvement during their time at their undergraduate institutions. It then investigated the career development and exploration students went through in deciding on a career in Student Affairs. Lastly, it studied the mentor relationships these students developed with professionals in Student Affairs. Based on the information found through the research conducted and the input of the undergraduate, graduate, and professional participants interviewed, the results and conclusions of this study will be discussed within the contents of the research questions.

**Undergraduate Student Involvement.** Many students' first exposure to the field of Student Affairs happens while attending their undergraduate institutions through

interactions with Student Affairs professionals in cocurricular activities in which they are involved (Blimling, 2002). The vast majority of the organizations in which the participants were involved had direct connections to professionals working in Student Affairs (see Table 1 in Chapter 4 for details). These professionals were often directly supervising those students, the participants in this study, and had the opportunity to have a great influence on them. Not only did these professionals help them become better employees and student leaders, but they also helped those students grow and develop, preparing them for entrance in to the work of Student Affairs.

One interesting connection discovered through this study is that participants who attended institutions that had a graduate program in Student Affairs discovered the career field during their freshman or sophomore year. Those who attended institutions without a graduate program did not discover the field until the junior or senior year of their undergraduate education. This phenomenon may occur because the graduate students in the Student Affairs program also have assistantships in various offices throughout campus such as Residence Life or Student Activities. In these positions, they are able to regularly interact with students either working in the same office as their assistantship or visiting that office for the services they offer. For example, Brian's supervisor was a graduate student with an assistantship in Residence Life, who oversaw a residence hall alongside a professional and they supervised the Residence Assistants and Desk Assistants in that building. Seeing his supervisor in this position caused Brian to become curious about his supervisor's work and education. Brian had a conversation with him to ask about it, which ultimately introduced him to Student Affairs as a career field.

Knowledge about the existence of the Student Affairs field by itself is not enough for students to pursue this profession for themselves. Pascarella and Terenzini (2009) stated, “Development or change is not merely the consequence of college’s impact on a student but rather a function of the quality of student effort or involvement with the resources provided by the institution” (p. 54). This can be applied to the process of discovering and becoming interested in Student Affairs. After learning about the career field itself, the participants utilized their supervisors as a source of information, inquiring about the field and becoming more involved in opportunities that would further expose them to Student Affairs.

Students choose to get involved while at their undergraduate institution for a variety of reasons, and they may choose to no longer be involved in certain departments or organizations because of the personal experiences they had. The second claim of Astin’s Involvement Theory (1999) stated, “Involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times” (p.519). Some of the participants chose to disconnect from their involvements at some point, and it was the opportunity to step away from the field that allowed them to reflect on their experiences and make the decision to explore, and eventually pursue, a career in Student Affairs.

### **Theory of Student Affairs Career Development**

All of the participants in this study had a unique path to Student Affairs with different experiences that took place at different times during and after their time at their undergraduate institutions. This relates to Krumboltz’s Happenstance Learning Theory

(2009), “The situations in which individuals find themselves are partly a function of factors over which they have no control and partly a function of actions that the individuals have initiated themselves” (p. 135). Because the participants chose to go to their particular undergraduate institutions and to be involved in their particular positions and organizations, they had experiences that led them to the decision to go into Student Affairs. On the other hand, if their experiences had not happened exactly how and when they did, the participants could have chosen a completely different career to pursue. For example, if Gina had not become burnt out with her job in Sports Marketing, she may have never gone back to campus and talked to her mentor about Student Affairs. While the details of each participant’s experiences varied, there emerged a process that all of the participants moved through, which included certain stages toward the decision to pursue this career. These stages include: Unaware, Introduction, Interest or Disinterest, Exploration, and Commitment

**Unaware.** The participants had no knowledge of Student Affairs as a profession coming into college. Isaac, the Student Affairs professional who wanted to be a teacher, stated, “No one ever comes to college thinking ‘I’m going to go into Student Affairs’ unless you had a family member or knew of someone that was in the profession.” Because of the nature of the profession, most students may be in this position, having no prior knowledge of the field.

**Introduction.** As stated previously, the participants were first introduced to the field of Student Affairs through their involvement in various organizations and/or departments at their undergraduate institutions. Similar to the medical students who found an interest in community care after having experiences in community medical

facilities in the research conducted by Howe and Ives (2001) discussed in Chapter 2, the participants became curious about the field of Student Affairs through their involvement and interactions with Student Affairs professionals. Because of the wide variety of offices that fall under the Student Affairs umbrella, there are numerous opportunities for students to interact with professionals in the field and learn about the career.

**Interest or Disinterest.** After learning of Student Affairs as a career field, the participants reacted in one of two ways. If they were unsure about their future career aspirations at the time they were introduced to Student Affairs as a career option, they immediately began investigating the field. Four of the nine participants reacted in this way. Those that had a previous career path planned in a different vocation were not initially interested in exploring Student Affairs, continuing on the path they planned. The other five participants reacted in this way. For example, Alan stated that he wanted to be a teacher ever since he was young and didn't want to give up his lifelong plans to teach. These participants were in the *Foreclosure* status of Marcia's Ego Identity Statuses (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2009) discussed in Chapter 2. They were set in their plans and had not yet had an experience or crisis that caused them to reflect on their career choice and they were still committed to their current career path.

**Change Event.** At some point later, the participants who chose to continue on their current career path had an experience that caused them to question their current career path. This is extremely similar to Marcia's description of *Crisis*, where instead of the participants questioning their own identity, they were questioning their career path and exploring potential alternative careers and repercussions they may have (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2009). For Gina, it was becoming burnt out in her



career post undergraduate; for Isaac, it was going home to student teach. They each had some *Change Event* occur which gave them the opportunity to examine their interests and values in an effort to decide on a new career path. These participants then, in a similar fashion as Marcia's *Crisis* (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2009), sat down with their current or previous supervisors who were Student Affairs professionals with knowledge of the field and began discussing the possibility of working in Student Affairs to gain more knowledge in order to make a more informed decision about their career path.

**Exploration.** At this point, all of the participants began investigating the career field through having conversations with their supervisors about what their job entails or reaching out for opportunities to learn more about the different areas of Student Affairs. In this stage, the participants tried to gain as much experience and absorb as much information about the profession as possible, in order to understand what it means to be a Student Affairs professional. Some of this exploration occurred while the participants were undergraduates. Some of the participants were exposed as undergraduates but did not fully explore this career option until after they had graduated. The actual process of exploration was different for each participant. Diana shadowed her supervisor to see what an average day looked like for her. Henry asked a graduate student he worked with about the Student Affairs graduate program she was completing. This exploration occurred at different levels, but helped the participants decide whether or not they could see themselves in this profession, and if so, where within Student Affairs they would like to work. Participants in this stage were most likely experiencing the *Moratorium* status,

struggling between pursuing Student Affairs as a career and staying with their original plan or choosing something else entirely (as cited in Evans et al., 2009).

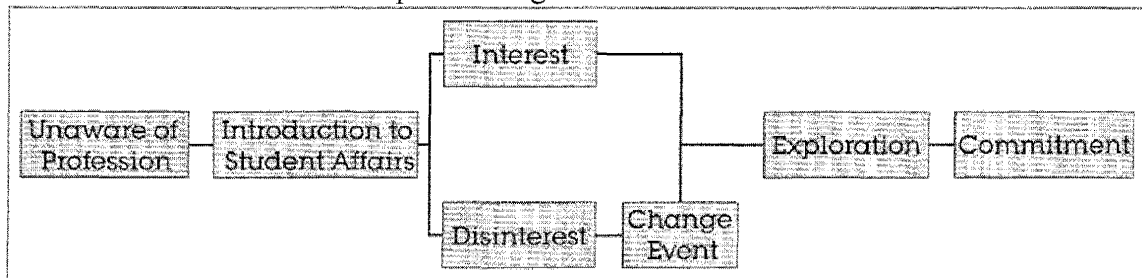
**Commitment.** The last stage involved the participants making the decision that Student Affairs was a field where they would be able to do work they enjoyed and be successful individuals. At this point the participants began taking steps necessary to go pursue the career field. This may include researching graduate programs in Student Affairs, gaining experience that would help build up their resumes and prepare them for graduate school, or developing an action plan to move forward in the process. After experiencing significant *Crisis* and exploring alternative career paths or majors, the participants moved into the *Identity Achievement* status, where they were able to clearly articulate their decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs.

Each of these stages involved various experiences and took different amounts of time for each participant. Brian reached the commitment stage by the end of his sophomore year. Frank, on the other hand, didn't reach commitment until his senior year. Even though the specific events that occurred were different to each of the participants, each stage described is present at some point in processes of all nine participants. For a visual representation of these stages, see Figure 1 below.

### **Recommendations**

There are several recommendations that current and future Student Affairs professionals should take away from this study. Never underestimate the importance of the relationships Student Affairs professionals form with their students. Student Affairs professionals can have an incredibly powerful impact on students, not only in their involvement or academics, but also in what they may decide to do for their rest of their

Figure 1.  
Student Affairs Career Development Diagram



lives. Until he got involved, Brian was completely decided in his career path, but the experiences and the interactions he had with Student Affairs professionals caused him to become interested in the field of Student Affairs and he gave up his plan to become a teacher and is going to graduate school for Student Affairs after he graduates. Whether Student Affairs professionals work with a student on a daily basis or with students once or twice, these interactions and relationships can have a significant influence on students in many ways. These relationships are not ones that can be forced, but often develop naturally through the interactions Student Affairs professionals have with their students. It is also important for Student Affairs professionals to be more intentional with the relationships they have with students. Many of the participants began their exploration of, and eventual commitment to, the career of Student Affairs through simply asking their supervisors about their job or education. What may seem like a harmless inquiry to a Student Affairs professional may in fact be a student looking for guidance with their personal lives or professional aspirations. Student Affairs professionals have an obligation to serve as a resource to students to help them be more successful and reach their goals.

Another recommendation is that institutions develop an organization where students who are curious about Student Affairs can come to ask questions and gain

knowledge about the field. This would give those individuals the opportunity to have various discussions with Student Affairs professionals and/or graduate students about the areas of Student Affairs, ways to gain experience as an undergraduate, different aspects of graduate school programs such as thesis requirement versus cumulative exam, assistantships or practicums, etc. Institutions should also develop a mentor program that connects students interested in Student Affairs with Student Affairs professionals outside of their direct supervision or area of involvement/employment. This would expose them to a different area within the field in which they may have an interest but have not had the opportunity to gain experience or knowledge. A mentor program would also allow the student to gain different perspectives on the field of Student Affairs, as well as give them the opportunity to network with more Student Affairs professionals.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

There are numerous opportunities for future research related to the study of the impact of undergraduate experiences on students' decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs. It would be very constructive for this study or a similar study to be conducted at other institutions to determine similarities or differences in the experiences of individuals on their path into Student Affairs based on the geographic location or size of the institution, public versus private institutions, as well as the number and kinds of opportunities for involvement at institutions. Having a much larger sample size would also help further explore and potentially solidify the validity of the theory developed as a result of this study.

Another suggestion would be to diversify the background experiences of the participants studied. As stated in Chapter 3, eight of the nine participants coincidentally

had, at some point, been involved in Residence Life. While this was unintentional, it may have had an impact on the results of the study. It would be beneficial to explore individuals who have no connection to Residence Life to gain a more broad scope of data. This may also help to identify trends in the path to Student Affairs based on what those students were involved in during their undergraduate experiences.

It would also be valuable to study professionals who have been working in the field for several years. One of the criteria for selecting Student Affairs professional participants for this study was that they had less than five years of experience as a professional in the field of Student Affairs. Examining those that have ten or more years of experience in the field may add more variety to the data gathered. Similarly, interviewing doctoral students or Student Affairs professionals working in upper administration could also provide varying experiences.

All of the participants in the study had completed, were currently in the process of completing, or were planning to complete a graduate program in Student Affairs. It would be interesting to examine those Student Affairs professionals that either completed a graduate program in a different area of study or do not have a Master's degree. This could generate valuable data on how those individuals discovered the field.

## **Conclusion**

The path into Student Affairs is full of influential experiences unique to each individual who decides to pursue this career, but through this study, commonalities have been found in those experiences that fall into specific stages that all of the participants went through on their journey to this field. The participants were first introduced to a career in Student Affairs through their involvement on campus. They were then either

interested or disinterested in the field. Those that were disinterested, at some point, had something happen that made them rethink their career. The participants began exploring Student Affairs as a potential career path. Finally, they all made the decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs and began actively taking steps toward that goal.

This study not only presented the stages that individuals go through on this path into Student Affairs, but also brought to light the importance of the relationships Student Affairs professionals have with students and the great impact that relationship can have on those individuals. It is crucial that Student Affairs professionals be more intentional with the relationships they develop with students and to serve as a resource for all students with which they interact. It is also important for institutions to develop an organization that provides students with the opportunity to ask questions and gain more knowledge about the field of Student Affairs, as well as develop a mentor program that allows those students to be exposed to different areas within Student Affairs and gain more connections to the field.

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**APPENDIX A****Interview Questions**

How Undergraduate Experiences Influence Students to Pursue a Career in Student  
Affairs

This interview will last approximately 60 minutes, and with your consent, will be recorded for the purpose of transcription and eventual analysis. You may terminate the interview at any time throughout the process.

- 1) Tell me about your undergraduate experience. What are/were you involved in? What were some of the key moments of your experience?
- 2) As you went through your undergraduate experience, were there specific moments that stand out to you? Can you tell me about them?
- 3) As you went through your undergraduate experience, were there specific people with whom you established relationships, specifically faculty or staff? Can you tell me who they were and how they influenced you? Would you define that person as a mentor to you?
- 4) Do you have a mentor? Who is that person and how do they act as a mentor to you?
- 5) When you first started college, what was your major? Did you change that at all during your undergrad? If so, what influenced those changes? If not, how did you know? Tell me about your decision making process.
- 6) When did you first begin thinking about a career in Student Affairs? What led you to thinking about a career in Student Affairs?
- 7) Who or what do you think had the most significant influence in your decision to pursue Student Affairs? Tell me more about how that impacted you. Did you develop a mentoring relationship with that person?
- 8) If you had to identify one thing that had the greatest influence on your decision what was it?
- 9) Where do you see yourself in 5 years? What are you doing to lead yourself down that path?
- 10) In what ways do you inspire others or support those who may be thinking about Student Affairs as a career?

## APPENDIX B

### Consent to Participate in Research

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by a student from the College Student Affairs program in the Department of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not completely understand before deciding whether or not you wish to participate.

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of undergraduate students and the impact those experiences have or had on the students' decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs. You have been asked to participate because you have pursued or are pursuing a career in Student Affairs through the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University.

Should you decide to participate in the study, you will take part in a semi-structured interview, lasting approximately 45 minutes – 1 hour and reflecting on your experiences as an undergraduate student. During the interview, you will be asked a series of open-ended questions and will be encouraged to give honest information. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study, greater than those associated with everyday life.

The interview will be audio recorded for the sole purpose of maintaining the accuracy of your statements. Your name will not be placed on any documents resulting from the interview and any information obtained with this study that can identify with you as a participant will remain confidential, viewed only by the principal researcher and the thesis advisor for the study. If a quote is used in any document, pseudonyms will be used to ensure that the participants' confidentiality. This document of informed consent will be kept separate from all interview data gathered. All audio recordings and transcripts of recordings will be kept locked in a secure location for five years beyond the conclusion of the study after which, they will be destroyed to protect your privacy.

Your decision to participate or not will not influence any current or future relation you have with Eastern Illinois University, the organizations or individuals you discuss, or the Department of Counseling and Student Development. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any questions you do not wish to or discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions regarding the study or your rights as a participant, please do not hesitate to ask. If you have additional questions later, please contact the primary researcher, Bryce Gergely (bjgergely@eiu.edu) who will be happy to answer them.

Your signature indicates that you have read the information above, fully understand what is being asked of you, and have agreed to participate. You may withdraw at any time without penalty after signing this form should you choose to discontinue your participation in this study.

In signing this form, I:

- \_\_\_ 1) agree to participate in all aspects of the study voluntarily;
- \_\_\_ 2) am aware of and agree to the audio recording of all interviews;
- \_\_\_ 3) recognize that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time;
- \_\_\_ 4) am giving permission to use any quotations without attribution.

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this thesis research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
 Eastern Illinois University  
 600 Lincoln Ave.  
 Charleston, IL 61920  
 Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
 E-mail: [eiuirb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@www.eiu.edu)

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Primary Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C

### Email to Participants

Mr./Mrs./Ms./Dr. **(Insert last name)**,

This letter is an invitation to participate in a research study. As a master's student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University, I am currently conducting research for my thesis on the impact of undergraduate experiences on the decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs under the supervision of Dr. Dianne Timm. As you have gone or are going through this process of pursuing a career in Student Affairs, I would like to invite you to participate in an in-person interview where you will be asked to discuss your experiences as an undergraduate and how they affected your decision to pursue a career in Student Affairs. I will be scheduling interviews to take place between during the summer and fall as schedules allow. The interview will last approximately one hour and would be arranged at a time convenient to your schedule. To ensure the accuracy of your input, I would ask your permission to audio record the interview.

There are no known or anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any questions you do not wish to and you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and all information you provided will be destroyed. Your name and the name of any organizations or individuals you mention will not appear in any thesis or publications resulting from this study unless express permission to do so is provided and you have reviewed the thesis text and approved the use. All information you provide will be considered confidential unless otherwise agreed upon, and all data collected will be kept in a secure location and confidentially disposed of after a period of five years. After the data has been analyzed, you will receive a copy of the executive summary. If you would be interested in greater detail, an electronic copy (e.g., PDF) of the entire thesis can be made available to you.

### *Contact Information*

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information about participation, please contact me at (317) 448-7020 or by email at [bjgergely@eiu.edu](mailto:bjgergely@eiu.edu). You can also contact my supervisor Dr. Timm by telephone at (217) 581-2400 or by email at [dtimm@eiu.edu](mailto:dtimm@eiu.edu).

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Institutional Review Board. However, the final decision to participate is yours.

Thank you in advance for your interest and assistance with this research.

Yours very truly,  
Bryce Gergely,  
Masters Candidate