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Entering Student Affairs: A Comparative Study of Graduate School Choice

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This article describes the college choice process of graduate students in College Student Personnel programs at a public university and a private religiously affiliated university. Despite differences in size, mission, and location of the two institutions studied, the research findings show that respondent populations were similar demographically and in the factors important to their choice of college, their reasons for choosing the field of student affairs, and the processes they used to select a graduate school.

At a time when higher education is increasingly concerned with rising costs, declining appropriations and endowments, increasing competition for students, and a growing market place orientation (Bok, 2003; Lewin, 2008), issues of college choice and persistence are pressing. With 16.3 million undergraduates earning 13% more bachelor's degrees between 1992 and 2006 (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2006), it is not surprising the vast majority of research and writing about college choice and persistence has been devoted to undergraduates. However, the authors believe this attention to undergraduate enrollment has obscured the growing importance of graduate enrollment.

In 2007, over 2.2 million students enrolled for graduate study. Six hundred thousand graduate students earned master's degrees in 2006, and 60,600 earned doctoral degrees (The Almanac of Higher Education, 2009). Between 1992 and 2003, the number of master's degrees awarded increased 33%, first professional degrees 7%, and doctoral degrees 3%; the numbers of students seeking graduate degrees are projected to continue to increase (USDE, 2006).

Unlike undergraduate college choice about which a considerable body of research exists, far less is known about graduate school choice. As Kallio (1995) noted, few studies have "examined factors that influence (graduate)

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students' application and matriculation decisions" (p. 111). Responding to the implied need for such studies, Talbot, Maier, and Rushlau (1996) examined the choice decisions of doctoral students in student affairs. The following factors were found to have the greatest influence on participants' decisions: "practical issues (financial incentives, location of program, and flexibility of program), reputation (program, institution, faculty, Division of Student Affairs, and graduates), and structural considerations (type of degree, core philosophy)" (p. 13). Mertz and McNeely (1989) found similar practical and reputational issues to be important to the decision-making process for doctoral students in educational administration, as did Kallio for master's and doctoral students in graduate programs at one institution. However, Kallio found additional practical and reputational considerations to be relevant, including spouses' plans, the ability to work in one's current job, cost beyond financial aid, program quality, research opportunities, campus life, social opportunities, and recruitment efforts by the faculty of the program. Olson (1992) distinguished between consideration and final decision factors among master's and doctoral students in a variety of graduate programs at one institution. The five consideration factors were, in rank order: geographic location, cost, reputation of the faculty and the program, personal contact with the faculty, and a recommendation from a significant other. The six final decision factors were, in rank order: positive interaction with university personnel during the decision process, the reputation of the program, the reputation of the faculty, the cost of attending, perceptions of the marketability of the graduate degree, and speed of acceptance into the program. In examining a number of institutions, Poock and Love (2001) affirmed the factors identified by Olson and Kallio as important for doctoral students in higher education programs.

While these studies provide information about factors in graduate school choice in general, they are limited by the way in which they studied college choice. First, their reliance on

survey design has limited our understanding of how and why the identified factors are important. Further, a number of the studies combined master's and doctoral degree students in the same study (Kallio, 1995; Olson, 1992); students in different kinds of graduate programs (Kallio, 1995; Olson, 1992); and different fields, fine arts (Treseder, 1995), educational administration (Mertz & McNeely, 1989), and business administration (Webb & Allen, 1994); thus obscuring possible differences by degree and field.

While not directly about graduate school choice, but rather choice of field, Taub and McEwen (2006) surveyed 300 master's degree students in student affairs. They found that 89% were White, 74% became aware of the profession as upperclassmen or after graduation, 88% identified student affairs professionals as the most frequent source of information about the profession, and 80% were encouraged to enter the field by a particular individual in student affairs. Building on their study, the present study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of student affairs professional on the choice of field and of the factors that influence their choice of graduate program to enter.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

If graduate programs in general, and programs in student affairs in particular, are to successfully recruit students to their programs, they need to understand how and why students make the decision to enter a program and what factors play a part in that process. Existing research suggests a number of factors and influences on that decision process, particularly with respect to student affairs programs, but do not provide the necessary in-depth understanding of the why and how of the decision process to help programs adequately frame their recruitment strategies. To secure that in-depth understanding, this study was designed to describe the college choice process of master's degree students in college student affairs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was framed and guided by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of student college choice. Drawing on the existing research and literature (Chapman, 1981; Hearn, 1984; Hossler, 1984; Jackson & Chapman, 1987; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983; Tierney, 1980; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), Hossler and Gallagher proposed a three-stage model for explaining the college choice process and the factors that influence the process at each stage. While conceptualized for undergraduate college choice, the model has been widely used in studies at both the graduate and undergraduate level (Bouse & Hossler, 1991; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Ceja, 2006; Dixon & Martin, 1991; Hayden, 2000; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Patitu, 2000; Poock & Love, 2001; Smith & Fleming, 2006; Stage, 1988; Strayhorn, 2006; Teeples, 2005; Treseder, 1995; Waters, 1992), and is considered "the prevailing model" by college choice researchers (Ceja, 2006, p. 88).

The Hossler and Gallagher model (1987) posits a three stage, linear, sequential process moving from *predisposition* to *search* to *choice*. The first stage, *predisposition*, relates to whether or not students have developed the disposition to go to college. Social/cultural factors relevant to forming this disposition include socioeconomic status, parental education and attitudes toward college, student ability and achievement, quality of school curriculum and extracurricular opportunities, and the status of the high school. In this stage, parents and peers are persons of influence. The *search* stage involves collecting information about colleges; evaluating those institutions; and constructing a choice set, an institution or group of institutions to which the student intends to apply. Geography and reputation of the institution (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983) and what institutions do to recruit students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) are factors in the process. At this stage, parents and school guidance counselors are perceived to influence the process and choices. In the *choice* stage, the choice set is reevaluated

and the decision about which institution to attend is made. Attributes of the institution and the nature of financial aid provided are factors in this stage, as is the "courtship" engaged in by the institution.

The Hossler and Gallagher model (1987) influenced the kinds of questions asked of the participants in this study, guided the analysis of data collected, and allowed for a comparison of the findings with the substantive body of research on college choice that has emerged from its use.

DESIGN AND METHODS

Research Design

Multisite explanatory case study design was used in the study to gain an in-depth understanding of the graduate college choice process in one type of program, college student affairs (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). Explanatory case studies (Yin, 1994) were chosen as a particularly effective way to learn about the choice process graduate students used from their perspective (emic), and to develop rich descriptions and explanations of the process they used (Merriam 1998; Yin, 1994).

Sites and Populations

A convenience sample of two institutions of higher education was selected. One was a public, research-extensive institution in the southeast and the other a private, religiously affiliated institution in the midwest. Two different institutions were chosen to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994), while the particular institutions were selected to allow for uncovering potential differences by type of institution.

The research-extensive institution is a public, 4-year, land grant institution, with approximately 26,000 students, 25% of whom are enrolled in a variety of graduate and professional programs. The 2-year, practitioner-oriented master's degree program in

college student affairs, the only such program in the state, has an administrative focus. The program enrolls 15 to 18 students each year; is relatively selective, has been offered for almost 50 years, and emphasizes experiential learning. The curriculum reflects the standards articulated by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2009) and prepares student affairs administrators for a variety of positions in the field. A convenience sample of 15 first year and 15 second year students volunteered to participate in the study.

The religiously affiliated institution is a private, 4-year, Jesuit research institution with approximately 12,000 students, 30% of whom are enrolled in graduate or professional schools. The 2-year master's degree program is based on theories of higher education administration, and reflects the CAS (2009) standards in its curriculum. This program is one of five higher education/student affairs programs in the state. Approximately 15 students are enrolled in the program each year, following a selective application and interview process. A convenience sample of 11 first year and 11 second year students volunteered to participate in the study.

The Institutional Review Boards (IRB) for each institution approved the study. The applications for IRB approval gave particular attention to how students would be solicited to ensure participation would be strictly voluntary. At the end of the semester students in the programs were sent an introductory e-mail explaining the study and the importance of considering whether or not they wanted to participate. They were told there would be no penalties for not participating and they should contact the researchers only if they were interested in volunteering. Recognizing the sensitivity of using our own students as participants, prior to each interview, we reviewed the nature of the study and how the data would be used, and reminded them they could refuse to answer any question that made them uncomfortable and withdraw from participation at any point without penalty. They were asked to

sign an informed consent document and to give their permission to be audiotaped during the interview. In spite of the precautions taken to ensure that participation in the study was voluntary, the use of students in our programs was a limitation of the study.

Data Collection

Individual in-depth interviews were the primary source of data for the study, supplemented by a form soliciting demographic information that was completed by each participant. The form requested information about the gender, age, race/ethnicity, hometown, enrollment status, program year, undergraduate institution and major, and number of graduate institutions to which the participants had applied. Interviews were held at the convenience of the participant and lasted an average of 45 minutes. The interviews were guided by a protocol of open-ended questions used with all participants. The questions addressed: (a) how and when the students chose the field of study, (b) how they decided upon the schools to which they applied for graduate study, (c) the factors which were important to them in their choice, (d) the factors that influenced their final choice, and (e) how their family members and close others felt about their decision to go to graduate school and their choice of a field of study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by site, then across the two sites. Demographic data were analyzed by site to develop a picture of the participants at that institution, to consider the findings from the site in relation to that picture, and to compare participants across sites. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed by site using open and axial coding consistent with the constant comparative method to derive patterns of responses to the questions (Corbin & Strauss, 1999; Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, common sense coding of phrases used by the respondents was used to

capture the meaning of the responses (open coding). Then these codings were compared and collapsed into categories of responses representing the patterns (axial coding). The patterns were then examined in terms of the participants' demographic characteristics. Following this, the findings were compared across sites (cross-case analysis) in a search for similarities and differences. The cross-site findings were then examined using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice.

The findings are presented in two parts. First, the findings from each site are reported. Then the cases are compared and the cross-case findings are presented.

Procedurally, the site studies were undertaken serially. The study was first completed at the public research institution and soon after, at the private religious institution.

FINDINGS

Findings for the Public Institution

Of the 30 participants at the research institution, 13 were male and 17 were female. Twenty-six were White, 3 were African American, and 1 was an American Indian. Sixteen were classified as in-state students and 14 as out-of-state students. Nineteen reported having relocated to attend the institution. Eleven were in the first year of the program, 15 in the second year, and 4 were in their third year. The participants were 22 to 47 years old. All but one were full-time students; 5 worked full-time, 21 worked as graduate assistants, and 4 worked part-time. The majority of participants ($n = 17$) applied to only one institution. Four applied to one or two other institutions, five applied to three or four, and four applied to five or more.

In spite of the fact most had been heavily involved in student activities as undergraduates, all but one professed not having known there was a field of student affairs while they were involved, and of being surprised when they found out it existed. For example, one

commented, "When I heard this was something you can do as a profession, which I didn't really know, I got really excited." In terms of how they found out about the field as a career, 25 participants described finding out about the field by accident. As one reported, "In talking with people in student affairs I asked, 'How do I get to do what you do?'" One respondent reported he had been significantly impacted as an undergraduate student by a student affairs professional, so he asked that person, "What do you call what you do?"

The interest in pursuing a graduate degree as a way of becoming a student affairs professional and being marketable in the field followed the discovery of the existence of a career. Student affairs professionals with whom the respondents had interacted, in or since college, played a significant role in revealing the existence of both a field of study and career. These "significant persons," as the respondents referred to them, were then influential in framing consideration of the schools and programs considered, either ones attended by the student affairs professionals or ones they considered of high quality. One participant commented, "I asked a lot of people out there [student affairs professionals] what programs were really good. Where did they apply?" Another shared, "I looked at four programs, but my boss was an alum of the program. I talked to him and Dr. [program coordinator], and I only applied to one."

Only 13 participants investigated or applied to schools other than the public institution. Of the 17 who applied only to the public institution, they were most influenced by "a passion for the institution" ($n = 5$), and the recommendation of the significant student affairs professional ($n = 14$). For five of these participants, the convenience and affordability of in-state tuition and the ability to continue in a job were important considerations in their choice of institution. The overlap in numbers was accounted for by the fact that multiple influences were given as priorities. Interestingly, these 17 participants not only did not investigate other programs, they did not investigate

the public school program until after they had applied. Thus their "choice set" was one institution, and their search followed, not preceded, the framing of their choice set of one. Of the 13 that investigated and applied to other schools, they investigated programs recommended to them or that they heard about from student affairs professionals. Their choice set was framed after completing their investigation. One participant had existing knowledge about the field and programs from relatives in the field. One other participant, after making the decision to enter the field, investigated every program in the country. She constructed a spreadsheet with criteria relevant to her and the different programs, and used that to narrow her search and choice set.

The factors that influenced institutional choice included location, financing graduate study, and personal considerations. Six sought to remain near home and family, or at least within driving distance, and 14 desired to get away from home. Five of these sought a warmer climate, one without snow. The possibility of obtaining an assistantship to finance their graduate study was a consideration for all except two already working full-time in the area. One respondent expressed the general sentiment of most participants, "I had to find a way to pay for it." The desire to be near a partner or spouse was important for three participants, and an undying love for the institution was a factor for five applicants. While the majority of participants said they were predisposed to attend the research school, the factors cited to account for their final choice of the research institution were: getting an assistantship/having their graduate study paid for, the nature of the program, and having a "good" experience in the application/visitation process. One participant captured the interplay of these attracting factors by commenting, "When I came here I just loved it. I loved the people I met. I loved the campus and the campus culture. The assistantship was perfect, tuition would be paid, and I like the area of the country."

Acquiring an assistantship was the most important factor in the students' final choice of institution. This was especially the case for the out-of-state applicants. The small size of the program, focus on administration rather than counseling, and the cohort arrangement were three characteristics identified as important in their graduate school choice. In addition, the participants identified positive interactions with the institution during the admission process, including the people they met and responsiveness of the program coordinator, as another factor in their choice. A number of the participants suggested that the way they were treated during the preadmission process was a major consideration in their choice of institution. They felt the program wanted them, and were thus disposed to choose that institution.

In contrast to their role in the undergraduate choice process, parents played almost no part in the graduate choice process. Indeed, most of the participants reported that they struggled to explain what the student affairs field was, what they would be studying, and what career they would pursue with an advanced degree in that discipline. One reported his parents said, "You're getting a degree in that? What's that?" Another reported, "I came from a very educated family.... [They] ... assumed I would go on to get a master's degree. When it came to the field [student affairs], they did not understand at all what it was. When I explained, they said, 'You actually get a degree in that?'" Another summed up the bottom line for most participants; "I think they still don't really know what it is.... I've tried to explain it to them.... It's just hard to understand. In the end [they said], 'whatever.'" The same was said of siblings and peers who had not had college experiences with student affairs professionals. There was only one case in which parents played a modest part in the choice process. Both parents were student affairs professionals, and concurred with their daughter's decision to go to another institution for graduate school.

Findings for the Private Institution

Twenty-two graduate students at the private institution participated in the study. All but one were female. The majority were White with one African American and one American Indian. Ten participants were married or in a significant relationship. Nine were in their first year of the program; 7 had completed their second year; and 6 were part time students with more than 2 years in the program. Twenty students were between 22 and 31 years of age; the other two were 45 and 57 years old respectively. Fourteen participants held graduate student assistantships; 8 were university employees with tuition reimbursements for 6 credits a semester.

All the participants had been involved in cocurricular activities throughout their undergraduate years. Despite their involvement, they were not aware of the field of student affairs and its career opportunities. A participant who had been active as an undergraduate in leadership positions in athletics, honor societies and study abroad, noted her surprise. "There is really a field that you can go into that prepares you to be an administrator in higher education." Another commented on her experiences in student activities and residential life, "I went to college and didn't want to leave." For the most part, the participants felt they "just stumbled" into the field.

Several participants noted it was student affairs professionals who had encouraged them to consider continuing in the field. "I was talking with my hall director one day and I said, 'I really like being an RA and I'm kind of sad that I'm graduating and going to be done.'" The hall director explained she could go to graduate school and begin a career in the field.

Financial support for graduate studies through tuition reimbursement and/or graduate assistantships was a major criterion in graduate school choice. The participants were clear that they could not afford graduate school and would not have attended this institution without tuition assistance and graduate assistantships. One participant observed, "There was

no way I was going to go to graduate school and pay for it." Six participants received tuition reimbursement as employees of the university and did not consider other institutions. For the others, their search for programs always included inquiries about graduate assistantships or campus employment.

Eleven participants acknowledged being constrained in their search for graduate schools by marriage, a committed relationship, or the desire/need to be closer to family. These participants reported investigating programs only in the greater metropolitan area where this institution was located. They also considered factors such as practitioner focus of the program, prestige and reputation of the institution, availability of service activities on the campus, class sizes, and the accessibility and helpfulness of the faculty during the search.

Additional factors noted by the participants included seeking a different geographic location from their undergraduate institution or an urban location with nearby institutions for internships and future job opportunities. Two respondents sought a program with a strong academic emphasis as preparation for doctoral study. Only one student specifically sought a religious institution.

Although some students considered other regional institutions, the majority ($n = 13$) applied only to the private institution. The reasons offered included the location of the institution, the role of a significant other, or their desire to return to their home city or region.

For the nine women in committed relationships (significant others or marriages) the search for graduate school was restricted because their partners had jobs in or near the location of the institution. As one explained,

My boyfriend and I were pretty serious. I knew that [this city] and the southeastern part of [the state] was kind of our range, because he had secured a full time job and his job makes a good amount of money and so we are going to stick around.

All the participants at the private institution said their families were supportive of their

pursuing graduate degrees. However, as with participants at the public institution, they explained their families really did not understand their work or their degree in student affairs. One observed, "My dad kind of thought I was doing student council for the rest of my life." Several participants acknowledged that the choices they were making regarding a career in student affairs did not match family expectations regarding career roles for women. One mentioned, "I'll be honest in saying my mother would have been happier in seeing me married than she would a master's degree."

As a group, the participants knew their parents were pleased with their selection of the private university because of its reputation. Several participants had family members (grandparents, uncles, siblings) who had graduated from the institution. Others knew the university as a religious school with a well-recognized men's basketball team. A few noted their parents' apprehension about the urban location. "They did not like that I was going to [this city]. They were very worried about it, but they were like, 'Okay, it's a good school.'"

Cross-Case Findings

There were clear differences between the two institutions in terms of mission (private religiously affiliated versus public secular), size (relatively small versus relatively large), and location (urban versus small-city). Further, the programs attracted different student populations. While neither was racially or ethnically diverse, the public institution was more diverse by gender. Thirteen of their 30 respondents were male, while only one of the private institution's 22 students was male. The public institution was also more geographically diverse, with nearly half of its students coming from out of state. In contrast, all of the private institution's students came from the region.

A comparison of the choice processes of students attending these two institutions suggests more similarities than differences. While 83% of the participants reported they were

active in student activities and student leadership as undergraduates, 70% of the participants reported a lack of knowledge about the field of student affairs as a career. Indeed, with very few exceptions, students in both programs declared they found the field "almost accidentally," and "never considered it" as a career until it was mentioned by student affairs professionals. Participants at both institutions learned about graduate study in the field from the same student affairs professionals who helped them recognize the existence of the field as a career. Over two-thirds (73%) of the participants spoke about how these student affairs professionals led them to the field and guided their consideration of schools to attend.

The majority of participants at both institutions (17 at the public institution and 13 at the private one) chose only one institution in their search. There was little indication of any investigation of student affairs programs and/or institutions prior to the participants applying. The remaining participants at each institution considered between one and five other institutions. Participants from the public institution were more likely than those at the private institution to have applied to or investigated more than one institution. Only one student who attended the public institution undertook a systematic examination of all programs in the country before narrowing her search.

The participants at both institutions were influenced by the same factors in choosing which institution to attend: financing, location of the program, nature of the program, and helpfulness of the faculty/coordinator. The factor cited most frequently was the opportunity to have their graduate studies financed. It was also a primary factor in their application to the program and to their choice of that program, even for those who applied to only one program. All the participants saw financing their education as something for which they were responsible and indicated that they either could not or did not want to incur any debt for their graduate education.

For applicants in both programs, the location of the institution was a factor in applying to and choosing the one they did, but in somewhat opposite ways. Many of the participants in the private program wanted to stay in the region or even in the city. This was not necessarily true for those who chose the public institution, although some sought to return to their home state or to be nearer to family. Almost half of the participants at the public institution sought to get away from home and/or to seek a warmer climate. For both groups, the particular institution affected their choice, although it is difficult to disaggregate this factor from issues of place and family. A number of participants at each school spoke of the reputation of the institution and the fact that family both knew it and/or attended it (private) or that they just had a special feeling for the school (public).

The nature of the program played a part in the decision to apply to and attend the institution they chose. Participants spoke about features of the program that were similar: the small class size, cohort arrangement, administrative focus, and emphasis on gaining practical experience as an integral part of the program. The extent to which these considerations factored into the decision making process is unclear, although they were identified by the participants.

In terms of influencing the choice of an institution, the participants spoke about how they were treated by the faculty (private institution) or the program coordinator (public institution) throughout the application process. They described being able to reach these people and having received prompt answers to their questions. The participants suggested that this welcoming attitude made them feel as if the institution and the program cared about them as individuals. Whether or not this factor was central to the decision or merely an afterthought of having already made the decision, thus perhaps an affirmation of having made a good choice, is impossible to determine. For participants at both institutions family and close others appeared to play a minimal role in the search or decision-making process. At the

private institution, having a spouse or partner did not effect the ultimate decision-making process, though it did effect the geographic scope of the search.

DISCUSSION

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study before discussing the findings. This study was limited to two student affairs programs situated in very different institutional contexts in two states. The findings relate to the programs studied and may not be representative of other student affairs programs or other types of graduate programs. At the same time, the similarities between the findings of this study and the existing literature on graduate school choice in student affairs enhance reader generalizability (Walker, 1980).

While one of the programs was more gender balanced, the majority female composition of both of these programs is consistent with findings about other graduate programs in student affairs. Taub and McEwen (2006) found "approximately two-thirds of students in master's programs in student affairs are women" (p. 207) and McEwen, Williams, and Engstrom (1990) expressed concern about the smaller number of men available for student affairs positions and the resulting "feminization" of the profession (p. 47). These studies raise questions regarding why the field is more attractive to females than males, particularly at the entry-level.

The lack of racial or ethnic diversity in student affairs graduate programs noted by Taub and McEwen (2006), who reported that 89% of students in such programs were White, was evident in the current study. The labor pool for entry-level positions in student affairs is similarly limited. African Americans account for 12-15% of the candidates, Hispanics for 4-5%, Asian Americans for 2-3%, and Native American for 0-1% (Turrentine & Conley, 2001). If changes in the racial and ethnic profile of student affairs are to be made, we need to identify

the factors that explain their relative absence from the field and what we need to do to attract racial and ethnic minorities to the profession.

While it had been suggested at an earlier time that "people enter student affairs careers by accident or quirk rather than by design" (Brown, 1987, p. 5), the verification of this perception and the extent to which it proved to be true of the participants in the study was unexpected. With very few exceptions the participants reported they had not realized there was a career in student affairs they might consciously pursue, and they had found out about the field unexpectedly and serendipitously. Richmond and Sherman (1991) argue that the absence of an undergraduate program leading to a career in student affairs makes it a "hidden profession." This may account for the failure of undergraduates to recognize a career in the field. However, given the extent to which the participants in the study had been active in student organizations as undergraduates and interacted with student affairs professionals in those experiences, it was hard to understand why they had not considered it might be a career for them to follow until late in their college career (Taub & McEwen, 2006) or afterwards. What makes undergraduates active in student affairs seemingly oblivious to the professional field underlying their college involvement and experiences? Why do they seem not to consider the possibility of the field until they either become disillusioned about a career path they have been following, are forced to think about what they will do after college, or assume a position in the field as a practitioner? Does the fact that the field is not clearly defined in terms of traditional disciplines render it nearly invisible? On the other hand, how can such a visible cadre of practitioners in colleges be so invisible as models and representatives of a career, particularly in light of their astounding influence in informing students about the field as a career and on their graduate choice once students ask them about doing what they do? Clearly the answers to these questions lie outside the present study. The relative invisibility of the field may not be

significant to the profession in the long run as long as students eventually find out about the field. However, it might have implications for who is attracted to the program and why.

One of the most powerful findings of the study was the triple role played by student affairs professionals as key persons in identifying the profession as a field, providing information about the profession, and recruiting students into the field (Taub & McEwen, 2006). The influence of these persons, as revealed by the participants, cannot be overstated. Students repeatedly shared that they learned about the field from student affairs professionals who encouraged them to enter the field. For the majority of the participants at the public institution, these student affairs professionals framed the graduate choice process by suggesting what program(s) they should consider. The influence of practitioners in the field on future practitioners has implications for recruiting students to the field and diversifying preparation programs and the field. If the practitioners with whom prospective students interact are largely White and female, might prospective student affairs practitioners envision the field in those terms, thereby making it more attractive to Whites and females, and potentially less attractive to minorities and males?

Consistent with what has been found in studies of graduate school choice in general (Kallio, 1995; Mertz & McNeely, 1989; Poock & Love, 2001; Talbot, Maier, & Rushchlau, 1996), financial support for graduate studies was a critical factor in the college choice process of participants in this study of student affairs. The participants overwhelmingly expressed their need and desire for financial support and explained the final decision of which program to attend, if more than one was considered, was dependent on the financial support provided through graduate assistantships and tuition reimbursements. The importance of this factor for student affairs preparation programs cannot be overstated. It suggests programs may be heavily dependent on their ability to broker funding for their students. In the face of lean

economic projections, this has worrisome implications for maintaining existing student affairs programs.

Other factors found to be influential for the participants were geographic location (region of country and closeness to family), nature of the program (class size, practitioner based, administrative focus), and the helpfulness of the faculty and/or coordinator. These factors were consistent with those identified in research on both undergraduate and graduate students' college choices (Kallio, 1995; Mertz & McNeely, 1989; Olson, 1992; Poock & Love, 2001; Talbot, Maier, & Ruschlau, 1996). This study suggests, however, that the importance of financial assistance may outweigh other factors in the choice process for graduate students in student affairs.

In the absence of a model of graduate school choice, studies of such choice, including this one, have used Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of undergraduate choice as a guiding framework (Poock & Love, 2001; Treseder, 1995; Waters, 1992), although it is not the only model used (Kallio, 1995), and several studies identify no theoretical framework at all (Olson, 1992; Mertz & McNeely, 1989; Taub, Maier, & Ruschlau, 1996). Interestingly, none of the studies using the Hossler and Gallagher model have raised questions about its appropriateness (fit) for describing graduate school choice. However, the process of graduate school choice that emerged in this study raises this question since the process used did not look much like the one described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987).

The first stage of the model, *predisposition*, does not relate well to the graduate choice process. Issues of the predisposition to go to graduate school, if there is such a thing, have not been examined in studies of graduate school choice and are not examined in this study. The first stage in the graduate school choice process for participants in this study was learning there was a student affairs profession and career for them to follow. This is different in kind and intent from anything encompassed

under *predisposition* in the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model.

As to the *search* process described in the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, it does not relate well to the choice process engaged in by participants in this study. This is due in large part to the pervasive role played by student affairs practitioners. Further, in contrast to the undergraduate choice process posited in the model, family members and close others played little to no role in the graduate school choice process of participants in the study.

The third stage of the model, *choice decision*, also does not relate well to the process used by participants in the study; for them, the *choice decision* was all but made before they began a search. The decision making process began, and to a great extent ended, with finding out there was a student affairs profession they could pursue, the first stage. Thus, the choice process in which participants in this study engaged did not look much like the demarcated, sequential stages described by the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model.

IMPLICATIONS

The limitations of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model of college choice for explaining the college choice process of the students in this study has implications for research on the choice process in student affairs. First, the use of the model as a theoretical framework would appear to be less than helpful, since it does not begin to describe the process in use. Beyond this, the findings about the model suggest a need for models of graduate school choice for student affairs, and perhaps for graduate school choice in general, rather than relying on a model of undergraduate choice. This need has already been suggested in the student affairs literature (Malaney, 1988; Poock & Love, 2001). We need to know a great deal more about the graduate school process, both within student affairs and across disciplines, if we are to build such models, but in the absence of such models,

we may be ill served to continue to rely on a model of college choice that does not fit.

The critical role played by student affairs practitioners in recruiting the next generation of student affairs practitioners and in identifying the field as a career has enormous implications for the field and for student affairs programs. It is apparent that undergraduate students, even when actively involved in student affairs activities, do not readily recognize student affairs as a career. Similarly, student affairs practitioners may not realize just how important they are in identifying and encouraging undergraduate students to enter the field. If the findings of the study speak to how recruitment operates in the field at large, current student affairs practitioners are the single most important element in the process, and what they do and do not do will determine the face of the profession in the years to come. Preparation programs in student affairs need to help their students understand the critical role they will play in identifying the profession as a viable career option, in recruiting future professionals, and indeed in framing the face and future of the profession. Beyond attracting individuals to the profession, more needs to be done to ensure that student affairs is recognized as a career and a profession.

A second implication that emerged from this study is the important role of financial aid in the choice process for graduate study in student affairs. Without a graduate assistantship or some form of job-related tuition assistance, many prospective students may be unable or unwilling to enroll in student affairs programs. The need for support is complicated by the prospective students' expectation that these assistantships or positions will be aligned with student affairs, thereby allowing them to gain experience in the field and build marketable resumes at the same time. At a time of economic retrenchment in colleges and universities across the country, providing financial aid and assistantships has become difficult, and graduate student affairs programs may find themselves with fewer students and less viable

programs. Student affairs programs will need to do all they can to develop alliances with departments and divisions that have assistantships, ask for institutional support to hire student affairs applicants for entry-level positions that provide tuition-waivers as a benefit of the job, and create scholarships or other means of providing financial aid that would allow for volunteering for marketable experiences.

Whether these are reasonable implications rests on the conduct of further research on graduate student choice in student affairs. Nevertheless, the findings of the study provide practical guidelines for existing programs in considering how to and on what basis to recruit students into their programs.

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