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### Why Should I Stay? The Factors Influencing Student Affairs Professional's Retention

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WHY SHOULD I STAY? THE FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENT AFFAIRS  
PROFESSIONALS' RETENTION

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Jonah D. Tews

May 2024

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Jonah Tews

entitled

Why Should I Stay? The Factors Influencing Student Affairs Professionals' Retention

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2024

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Drew Moser, Ph.D.                      Date  
Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kelly Yordy, Ph.D.                      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Scott Gaier, Ph.D.                      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Skip Trudeau, Ed.D.                      Date  
Director, M.A. in Higher Education

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the factors influencing the retention of student affairs employees. It examines if role expectations, financial compensation, burnout and emotional investment, value and importance, and supervisor influence factor into student affairs professionals' decision to remain in the field. This study found significant positive correlations exist between remaining in the field and clear role expectations, good financial compensation and benefits, and a healthy balance between work and life, indicating these factors could positively influence a student affairs professionals' decision to remain in the field. These findings add to the research pertaining to the retention of student affairs professionals.

## **Acknowledgements**

Brittany—my amazing wife—Thank you for all the love, encouragement, and support you have given me. Thank you for talking about this topic way more than you would like and pushing me to work on this project when I did not want to. Thank you for believing in me when I did not believe in myself, and for all the sacrifices you have made for me to be able to chase my dreams. This journey would not have been possible without you. I am excited to continue to chase our dreams together as this chapter closes and we turn the page on our story.

Cohort XVI—Noah and Kalyn—Coming into MAHE I certainly was not expecting to be a cohort of three. Noah and Kalyn thank you for allowing me to be myself in class and for being my supports through this program. I deeply treasure the times we are together in class and the ways we have come to know one another outside of class. Thank you for being the people that have listened to my arguments and thoughts for the past two years. I am deeply grateful to be a small part of both your stories.

MAHE Faculty—Thank you for caring for me as more than just a student. The ways you have challenged and supported me through this program have made me a better student and professional. Thank you for making these last two years such a wonderful experience. I am eternally grateful and thank you is not enough.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	2
Retention .....	2
Purpose of the Study .....	3
Conclusion .....	3
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	5
The Great Resignation.....	5
Attrition .....	7
Role Expectations .....	7
Financial Compensation .....	8
Burnout and Emotional Investment .....	9
Value and Importance .....	10
Lack of Professional Advancement .....	11
Retention .....	11
Factors of Retention .....	12
Conclusion .....	14
Chapter 3 Methodology .....	16
Design of the Study.....	16

Instrument.....17

Context and Participants.....17

Procedure.....18

Data Analysis.....18

Chapter 4 Results.....19

Chapter 5 Discussion .....26

    Implications for Practice .....30

    Implications for Future Research.....31

    Limitations.....32

    Conclusion.....33

References.....35

Appendix A Survey Questions.....38

Appendix B Informed Consent .....42



**List of Tables**

Table 1 <i>Participant Demographics</i> .....	19
Table 2 <i>Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables</i> .....	20
Table 3 <i>Results From a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of Intent to Leave Student Affairs Within Two Years and Study Variables</i> .....	22
Table 4 <i>Results From a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of Remaining in the Student Affairs Field and Study Variables</i> .....	24

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Undergraduate students typically begin their college careers during welcome weekend by moving into an on-campus dormitory and from there start to participate in numerous on-campus activities throughout their college experience. Eventually, the student experience culminates in seeking career guidance and assistance in the job search by their senior year. All of these activities require professionals to walk alongside students through critical developmental experiences. Student affairs professionals provide unique, developmental services to students outside of the classroom while they complete their undergraduate journey. Often these services and programs include residence life, career development offices, student activities, offices of intercultural programs, global engagement offices, and many more. The work done by student affairs professionals helps to shape and develop students in life-changing and long-lasting ways. Unfortunately, these important student services are under threat.

Large numbers of student affairs professionals are leaving the field. In a recent survey, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) found that almost 40% of student affairs workers are unsure of staying in, or are planning on leaving, the student affairs field within the next five years (Chamberlain et al., 2022). Further, individuals who left the field have cited many different reasons for doing so, including unclear job expectations and roles, poor financial compensation, burnout and

emotional investment, devalued work, lack of importance, and lack of professional advancement (Bichsel et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2016; Silver & Jackman, 2014).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Failure to address student affairs professionals' devalued feelings and lack of appreciation will further contribute to the rise of professionals leaving the field.

Continued attrition of student affairs professionals could potentially change the current undergraduate model known by higher education professionals. Understanding why student affairs professionals are leaving the field provides important context for administrators. Further, understanding why individuals continue to remain in the student affairs field may provide administrators with the best practices to implement in hopes of creating a sustainable job and work environment.

### **Retention**

Often, when discussed in a higher education setting, retention refers to keeping students at a given institution. However, talent retention applies to the faculty and staff as well. Specifically applied to this study, retention is an institution's ability to keep faculty and staff employed at the institution.

Given the current landscape of higher education and the role of student affairs professionals within higher education, the alarming rate of attrition in the field is notable. The research and literature detailing why individuals have left the student affairs field is extensive. However, it is just as important to discuss the retention of student affairs employees and understand the factors which assist in the retention of student affairs professionals.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Student affairs professionals help to create key educational and developmental experiences for students outside of the traditional classroom. These professionals contribute to promoting growth and self-development that will impact students even after graduation. As previously described, there is a notable and alarming trend of student affairs professionals looking to leave the field. Much of the literature surrounding this topic has focused on the reasons individuals left the student affairs field. These factors—devalued work, burnout, emotional investment, and poor compensation, among others—are important for institutions and professionals in the student affairs field to understand. However, research has yet to adequately delve into the perceptions of the student affairs professionals who are choosing to stay in the field, despite their colleagues' departure. Therefore, this study sought to fill this gap in existing research by examining the student affairs professionals who remain in the field and the factors contributing to their persistence.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the important role student affairs professionals occupy makes it important to study those who remain and fulfill these roles. Seemingly, the perceived relationship between the institution and student affairs professionals is a large factor in the retention of student affairs professionals. While there is an understanding of the factors contributing to the attrition of student affairs professionals, there is less of an understanding of the factors contributing to student affairs professionals staying in the field. Thus, the following research question guided this study: What factors contribute to the retention of student affairs professionals? The following literature review provides an

important context to this study by describing the attrition and retention of student affairs professionals.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The retention of student affairs professionals is an important and urgent topic currently surrounding higher education. The highly intentional work conducted with students by student affairs professionals is an important aspect of the college experience. Retaining professional, qualified, and intentional staff and faculty members is one of the most pressing issues facing higher education. This chapter will examine the current literature and the trend of attrition of professionals in the student affairs field, particularly their reasons for departing from the field. Currently, a small amount of literature exists explaining the reasons student affairs professionals remain in the field, thus making it important to review the reasons student affairs professionals are leaving the field. The review of the literature will also explore the factors relating to the retention of student affairs professionals.

#### **The Great Resignation**

Millions of employees, across all fields and industries, are leaving their current jobs. This phenomenon, known as “The Great Resignation,” first coined by Texas A&M professor Anthony Klotz, is sweeping across the country (Cohen, 2021). As the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) reported in their November 2021 Job Openings and Labor Turnover Report, 4.5 million people quit their jobs since September 2021, reaching an all-time high since the Bureau began tracking this metric. While the Coronavirus pandemic may exacerbate this number, the number of people quitting their jobs has

remained consistent. In a subsequent Job Openings and Labor Turnover Report, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported some change a year later: In December 2022, 4.1 million individuals quit their job (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023a). However, in August 2023 it was reported that 3.5 million individuals had quit their jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023b). While these numbers seem to be decreasing, individuals are continuing to leave their jobs for numerous reasons, and higher education, specifically student affairs, is not immune to the Great Resignation.

In 2022, the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) published a report looking specifically at employee retention in higher education. Their study had 3,815 participants, all higher education employees across several departments including student affairs. When asked about the likelihood of looking for other employment within the next 12 months, approximately 50% of participants were somewhat likely, likely, or very likely to leave the higher education field (Bichsel et al., 2022). Further from this report, CUPA-HR specifically looked at the retention of supervisors in higher education. Supervisors made up 57% of the 3,815 participants in the study. Of these supervisors, 36% indicated they are likely or very likely to seek other employment within the next 12 months (Fuesting & Schneider, 2023). These results show the industry of higher education is also part of the Great Resignation, as colleges and universities in the United States are at risk of losing half of its current student affairs employees within the next year. Further, the retention of employees seems to be worsening rather than improving.

## **Attrition**

The difficulty of retaining student affairs professionals is not a recent trend. Attrition rates of student affairs professionals in 1998 reported 32% of student affairs professionals left the field within five years of starting their career, while 61% of student affairs professionals left the field within six years of starting their career (Lorden, 1998). Further, in 2016, 41.7% of student affairs professionals left the field after five years or fewer, and over 60% of professionals left the student affairs field after 10 years or fewer (Marshall et al., 2016). Student affairs professionals are not experiencing longevity or sustainable work in the student affairs career field, and several factors play into this reality. Exploring these factors further provides more context to the high attrition rates seen in the student affairs field.

## **Role Expectations**

Several themes appear across the research and literature looking at the attrition of student affairs professionals. While the student affairs field is highly diverse, workers struggle to understand the expectations and responsibilities of their roles (Chamberlain et al., 2022; Renn & Jensen-Anger, 2008). Those working in the student affairs field reported hidden responsibilities and duties performed outside of the job description could contribute to student affairs professionals leaving the field (Chamberlain et al., 2022). Further, individuals who transitioned from a graduate program in higher education or a related field expressed, “how little they felt they understood the expectations and responsibilities of their new roles” (Renn & Jensen-Anger, 2008, p. 324). After completing an advanced degree, professionals still lacked clear expectations and responsibilities within their roles. Student affairs professionals are qualified, well-



educated workers. However, student affairs professionals continue to face uncertain and unclear job expectations, further contributing to their early departure from the field.

### **Financial Compensation**

A top reported reason among student affairs professionals considering leaving the field, or among those who have already left the field, is the lower levels of financial compensation (Chamberlain et al., 2022; Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016). Often, jobs in student affairs require individuals to possess a master's degree. However, the financial compensation received by professionals does not equate to the level of education required to work in the field. Entry-level positions requiring a master's degree often come with a less than \$40,000 annual salary (Sallee, 2022). In a study consisting of 153 student affairs professionals who left the field, only 28% felt their salary was satisfactory (Marshall et al., 2016). Moreso, the Compass Report shows 88% of current professionals believe their financial compensation for the level of education and experience required for their roles is not competitive (Chamberlain et al., 2022). Finally, students completing an advanced degree in higher education and student affairs plan on never working in the student affairs field, mentioning it as a poor financial investment (Silver & Jakeman, 2014).

A disparity exists between the financial compensation and benefits offered to well-educated student affairs professionals and the level of experience and education required to work in the field. Failing to receive adequate compensation for their work has created an apparent reason for student affairs professionals to leave the field and find work elsewhere. Without comparable pay, the retention of student affairs professionals will continue to suffer.

## **Burnout and Emotional Investment**

Student affairs is a heavily relational field. Often student affairs jobs center around the development, mentoring, and support of students during their college careers. However, in recent years the increase in mental health concerns in students has risen. Thus, student affairs professionals become one of the first to respond to mental health concerns among students. This increase in mental health responses has made student affairs professionals feel that a significant portion of their day consists of responding to students' mental health concerns, which has caused an increase in emotional investment from student affairs professionals (Jaschik, 2020; Silver & Jakeman, 2014). Student affairs professionals have begun to describe their work as “heartbreaking,” “exhausting,” and “draining” (Silver & Jakeman, 2014). This consistent emotionally taxing work has created a theme of burnout among professionals in the student affairs field, causing them to quickly leave the field.

Along with increasing emotional investment and mental health intervention, student affairs professionals often face irregular and excessive work hours (Bichsel et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2016; Sallee, 2022). This increased work demand leaves little room for professionals to spend time with family, pursue personal goals, or participate in leisure activities. This leaves student affairs professionals with a lopsided work–life balance, with work demanding the most attention. Bichsel et al. (2022) report about 67% of full-time higher education employees work more hours than their job requirements; notably, almost 50% of those higher education employees report working an additional one to ten hours per week. More specifically, out of 153 student affairs employees studied, 70% reported having excessive weekend and evening work (Marshall et al.,

2016). The irregular, excessive, and emotionally burdensome work conducted by student affairs professionals has created an unsustainable career where people are quickly leaving.

### **Value and Importance**

Student affairs departments live in an interesting space on university and college campuses. While student affairs programming often does not resemble formal classroom education, it remains an incredibly useful form of education obtained outside of the traditional curriculum and the student's intended career. Despite the importance of student affairs work, these departments are often the first to see cuts, both in personnel and in their budget (Silver & Jakeman, 2014). Interestingly, in a study looking at the job satisfaction of student affairs professionals, less than 50% of 145 respondents perceived student affairs to be an important entity on their campus. Yet, close to 100% of participants felt their job was important (Bender, 2009). While professionals in student affairs feel their work is important, they receive little support or acknowledgment for their work from others in the institution.

The Compass Report also examined feelings of appreciation in student affairs professionals: 81% of respondents felt underappreciated and undervalued by their institution (Chamberlain, 2022). Further, professionals also reported ineffective, poor, or a lack of supervision to be a reason leading to individuals leaving the field (Marshall et al., 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). In addition to their already laborious work with students, student affairs professionals are also having to prove their legitimacy to supervisors and colleagues in their institutions. Given these conditions, it is not surprising to see a high attrition rate of those in student affairs positions.

### **Lack of Professional Advancement**

Perhaps one of the most cited reasons for leaving the student affairs profession was the lack of opportunities for advancement (Bichsel et al., 2022; Chamberlain et al., 2022; Ellis, 2021; Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016). In 2022, CUPA-HR reported 46.3% of higher education workers strongly disagree or disagree with the existence or availability of opportunities for professional advancement (Bichsel et al., 2022). One student affairs professional described the lack of opportunities to advance by saying, “I don’t use the term glass ceiling. It’s a cinder block” (Ellis, 2021, para. 38). This accurately describes the difficult nature of student affairs workers to advance in their field. Rather than breaking through into higher positions, student affairs professionals continue to struggle in their current roles.

This lack of advancement is partly due to the limited number of senior-level positions available. Thus, on the unlikely chance an individual does get to move up into a senior position, they tend to remain in those senior positions for long durations. Further, if an individual is unable to relocate for a senior position, it becomes very difficult to advance within their current institution (Marshall et al., 2016). This leaves the rest of the field trying to figure out new ways forward, making it unsurprising that a large number of them find other opportunities elsewhere outside of higher education and student affairs.

### **Retention**

Extensive research exists on talent retention, especially looking at the general workforce. Frank et al. (2004) described employee retention as “the effort by an employer to keep desirable workers in order to meet business objectives” (p. 13). These actions by employers either help to keep workers employed at the business or drive

workers away. Frank et al. also describe turnover as the “unplanned loss of workers who voluntarily leave and whom employers would prefer to keep” (p. 13). The goal of most businesses, in regard to their employees, is to keep them working in their positions for the maximum amount of time. If a business fails to keep employees, it may face negative consequences.

Several factors influence the retention of employees. These factors often vary throughout different industries and businesses. However, common factors influencing employee retention include development opportunities, compensation, work–life balance, management, work environment, social support, and autonomy within the job (Kossivi et al., 2016). While these are the commonly cited factors influencing retention, it is difficult to generalize these factors across all fields of work. Thus, it is important to study specific businesses, positions, and fields of employment to better understand the factors influencing employees’ decisions to stay with their employer. Specifically, it is important to understand the factors influencing student affairs professionals and their persistence within their roles.

### **Factors of Retention**

As previously explored, several factors exist and explain why student affairs professionals have left or plan on leaving the field. While exploration into the factors of persistence among remaining student affairs professionals is sparse, despite the reasons commonly cited for leaving the field, certain individuals seek to remain in the student affairs field. However, one study explored the factors that contributed to career longevity for student affairs employees. This study consisting of 10 student affairs employees

explored three key questions regarding early workplace experiences, “mattering,” and supervisors’ influence on their retention (D’Arcangelo, 2022).

D’Arcangelo (2022) found in her study four key experiences that helped contribute to long-term commitments from student affairs professionals: a platform for practice, substantial work experiences, connection to professionals, and high-impact moments. A platform for practice refers to the ability to allow student affairs professionals to do their job with mistakes. This is especially important for professionals in the early stages of their careers. Second is substantial work experience, meaning small or minor projects are insufficient. Professionals want to contribute to the greater purpose and feel a sense of involvement with their work. Student affairs professionals also want to feel connected to other professionals in the institution. Feelings of making a difference and positive connections to other professionals helps create a pathway for longevity in the field for student affairs professionals. Finally, high-impact moments with students also help to promote longevity in the student affairs field. During these important moments, professionals feel like a helper and change agent that promotes persistence in the field.

D’Arcangelo (2022) also looked at feelings of mattering in student affairs professionals. She found those who remained in the field longer than five years feel a strong sense of appreciation, importance, and empathy during struggles. Student affairs professionals who persisted felt their work mattered, contributed to the institution, and believed others recognized their work. Further, they felt supported by others and their supervisor during times of struggle.

Finally, D’Arcangelo (2022) asked how the student affairs professional’s supervisor influenced their retention. Participants said they believed it was important for their supervisor to help them figure out their next career steps in student affairs. These conversations with supervisors provided student affairs professionals with mentorship and development, so they felt prepared to take the next steps into higher positions. The importance of this mentoring helped to retain individuals in the field and even develop the skills needed to advance within the student affairs field (D’Arcangelo, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Higher education, and specifically student affairs, is not immune to the Great Resignation occurring throughout the world. In fact, student affairs could be one of the most impacted industries. Several factors including poor financial compensation, increasing levels of burnout and emotional investment, underappreciated and undervalued work, and few advancement opportunities have all contributed to the attrition of student affairs professionals. The literature and research are clear on the reasons why these individuals have left the field. However, very little research exists to explain why individuals are staying in the student affairs profession. Previous research conducted on the retention of student affairs employees seems to point toward key work experiences, feelings of value and mattering, and career development from supervisors as indicators for the retention of student affairs employees.

Further research is necessary for institutions and supervisors to fully understand and know the reasons contributing to the retention of student affairs professionals. Failure to fully understand this problem will not only continue to affect those working in the field, but the loss of professionals could impact the students and institutions which rely so

heavily on their work. This study will seek to contribute to the research of student affairs professionals' retention by asking the question: What factors contribute to the retention of student affairs employees?



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This study sought to explore the factors influencing the retention rates of student affairs professionals. Specifically, this study examined how role expectations, financial compensation, burnout, value and importance, and supervisor influence affect the retention of student affairs professionals. This chapter describes the methodological design, provides the context of the study, and identifies the participants. Finally, this chapter describes the data collection procedures and explains the data analysis.

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

The study utilized a survey research design to collect quantitative descriptive data. The researcher administered the survey to participants beginning in April 2023, and the survey remained open for responses until the end of August 2023. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), descriptive statistics “help to summarize the overall trends or tendencies in your data, provide an understanding of how varied your scores might be, and provide insight into where one score stands in comparison with others” (p. 181). The survey sought to gather measurable data to describe certain trends among student affairs professionals and their retention within the field. Explicitly, this survey design attempted to measure the experiences of student affairs professionals’ role expectations, financial compensation, burnout, value and importance, and the role of their supervisors and

determine if any relationship exists between these factors and student affairs employees' retention.

### **Instrument**

The study utilized a descriptive survey for data collection (see Appendix A). The researcher developed the questionnaire based on commonly asked questions on employee retention in the workplace. The questionnaire also adapted questions based on the five item turnover intention questions from Mullen et al. (2018) to fit a student affairs employee's context. While intent to quit is not directly indicative of attrition, measuring intent to quit can give a reasonable insight into the attitudes and thoughts surrounding an employee's future within an organization (Cohen et al., 2016). Unfortunately, no test for reliability and validity was present for this created survey. The survey contains seven multiple-choice demographic questions, 23 Likert scale questions, and one open-ended question with the intent to measure the participants' perspectives on the five areas previously described. Participants rated their experiences on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement.

### **Context and Participants**

This study occurred among current employees working in student affairs; a majority of participants work at small, private, faith-based institutions. Participants received access to the questionnaire through the Association for Christians in Student Development (ACSD) community pages, the researcher's LinkedIn profile, and through emails directed to specific vice presidents and deans working in student affairs to share with their teams. The research did not collect any identifiable data within the survey, and it is not a part of this study. Participants completed an informed consent (see Appendix

B) and could choose to discontinue participation at any point during the survey. After the completion and submission of the survey, all submitted surveys remained confidential. The goal of this study was to discover the factors influencing the retention of student affairs professionals.

### **Procedure**

The researcher posted the questionnaire electronically to possible participants in late April 2023. Participants then had until the end of August 2023 to complete the questionnaire. The annual ACSD Conference took place from June 5 to 8, 2023. Thus, sending the survey out to members of ACSD during April provided the best opportunity for data collection as members are more likely to read and follow up on communications sent from ACSD. Finally, keeping the data collection window open until end of August allowed the researcher more opportunities to try and gain participants while attending the conference, making posts on the ACSD community pages, and contacting vice presidents and deans to share the survey with the professionals they supervise. Once the data-gathering period closed, the researcher analyzed the data and looked for themes relating to the research question.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher analyzed the data collected from the retention survey. This analysis sought to find patterns of retention in relation to the five categories of role expectations, financial compensation, burnout, value and importance, and supervisor influence through the use of descriptive statistics and correlation tests. The purpose of this study is to examine the factors influencing the retention of student affairs employees. Chapter 4 describes the results of the data analysis in detail.

## Chapter 4

### Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence the retention of student affairs employees. This chapter provides the context for the study and describes the population included in the data analysis. Additionally, this chapter analyzes the descriptive statistics based on the data collected from the survey as well as more detailed descriptions of Pearson correlation coefficient scores.

This study consisted of 108 student affairs employees. The participants consisted of 55.6% females ( $n = 60$ ) and 44.4% males ( $n = 48$ ). Further, 51.9% of participants have worked in the student affairs field for five or more years. See Table 1 for a more detailed description of participant demographics.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	48	44.4
Female	60	55.6
Institution size		
Small (0–3,000 undergraduates)	80	74.1
Midsize (3,000–10,000 undergraduates)	18	16.7
Large (10,000+ undergraduates)	10	9.3
Institutional type		
Private faith-based	93	86.1
Private non-faith based	3	2.8
Public	10	9.3
Two-year	2	1.9
Position level		

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Entry level	32	29.6
Mid-level	60	55.6
Senior level	16	14.8
Years in current position		
0–3 years	71	65.7
3–5 years	17	15.7
5+ years	20	18.5
Years in student affairs		
0–3 years	33	30.6
3–5 years	19	17.6
5+ years	56	51.9

The descriptive statistics displayed in Table 2 are the means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) for each of the survey questions. The statistics displayed are for each of the five potential factors that may influence the retention of student affairs employees, as well as the means and standard deviations for the intent to leave and general retention questions. Participants responses were converted to numerical values from the original Likert scale (“Strongly Disagree” or “Very Unlikely” = 1, “Disagree” or “Somewhat Unlikely” = 2, “Neither Disagree nor Agree” or “Neither likely nor Unlikely” = 3, “Agree” or “Somewhat Likely” = 4, “Strongly Agree” or “Very Likely” = 5).

**Table 2**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables*

Variable	M	SD
Intent to Leave		
7. Likelihood to leave SA Field in the next 2 years	2.31	1.28
8. Thinking about how it would be to leave SA Field	3.02	1.26
9. Interested in looking for a job outside of SA Field	2.77	1.25
10. I do not want to leave my current position	2.78	1.27
11. Likelihood to seek other jobs outside of SA in the near future	2.79	1.27
General Retention		

Variable	M	SD
12. Recommend a career in SA	3.94	0.90
13. I would apply for my job again	4.02	1.02
14. My work fulfills a sense of calling	4.45	0.74
15. Remaining in the SA Field for a majority of my career	3.81	1.02
16. There are opportunities to advance with the SA Field	3.36	1.20
Role Expectations		
17. Job description accurately matches job duties	3.55	1.21
18. The number of hours I work is manageable	3.52	1.07
19. Expectations are clear and communicated	3.50	1.13
Financial Compensation		
20. Pay matches educational qualification	2.64	1.23
21. My pay is competitive	2.43	1.23
22. I am satisfied by my benefits	3.52	1.11
Burnout and Emotional Investment		
23. Regularly perform tasks/assignments outside of job duties	3.44	1.04
24. I find my work emotionally draining	3.63	1.07
25. Work and personal life are well balanced	3.38	1.05
26. Sufficient time to pursue interests outside of my career	3.25	1.03
Value and Importance		
27. Work is acknowledged and valued by others	3.44	1.20
28. Work contributes to the mission of the institution	4.52	0.57
29. Work is meaningful and impactful	4.31	0.77
Supervisor Influence		
30. Supervisor provides regular and useful feedback	3.25	1.31
31. Supervisor values my feedback	3.77	1.12
32. Supervisor trusts and empowers me to do my work	4.16	1.08
33. I view my supervisor as a mentor	3.14	1.36
34. Relationship with supervisor is developmental	3.16	1.22

*Note.* “Strongly Disagree” or “Very Unlikely” = 1, “Disagree” or “Somewhat Unlikely”

= 2, “Neither Disagree nor Agree” or “Neither likely nor Unlikely” = 3, “Agree” or

“Somewhat Likely” = 4, “Strongly Agree” or “Very Likely” = 5.

The average score to the question “My work fulfills a sense of calling” was 4.45 ( $SD = 0.741$ ) which indicates a general agreement that their work fulfills a higher sense of purpose. Further, the mean of the question “How likely are you to leave the student

affairs field in the next two years” was 2.31 ( $SD = 1.28$ ), while the mean for the question “It is likely that I seek other jobs outside of student affairs in the near future” was 2.79 ( $SD = 1.27$ ). Looking at these means generally indicates this population is unlikely to leave the student affairs field in the near future.

With the participants answering questions regarding intent to leave and retention, correlation tests determine if there were any statistically significant correlations between the five factors and their intentions to stay or leave. Table 3 reports the bivariate correlation coefficient scores ( $r$ ) between the five factors (role expectations, financial expectations, burnout and emotional investment, value and importance, and supervisor influence) and the question: How likely are you to leave the student development field in the next two years?

**Table 3**

*Results From a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of Intent to Leave Student Affairs Within Two Years and Study Variables*

Variable	$r$
Intent to Leave	
7. Likelihood to leave SA Field within the next 2 years	-
General Retention	
14. My work fulfills a sense of calling	-.305**
Role Expectations	
17. Job description accurately matches job duties	-.266**
18. The number of hours I work is manageable	-.376**
19. Expectations are clear and communicated	-.417**
Financial Compensation	
20. Pay matches educational qualification	-.303**
21. My pay is competitive	-.312**
22. I am satisfied by my benefits	-.404**
Burnout and Emotional Investment	
23. Regularly perform tasks/assignments outside of job duties	.179

Variable	<i>r</i>
24. I find my work emotional draining	.369**
25. Work and personal life are well balanced	-.506**
26. Sufficient time to pursue interests outside of my career	-.497**
Value and Importance	
27. Work is acknowledged and valued by others	-.361**
28. Work contributes to the mission of the institution	-.142
29. Work is meaningful and impactful	-.268**
Supervisor Influence	
30. Supervisor provides regular and useful feedback	-.237*
31. Supervisor values my feedback	-.317**
32. Supervisor trusts and empowers me to do my work	-.239**
33. I view my supervisor as a mentor	-.137
34. Relationship with supervisor is developmental	-.079

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

As seen in Table 3, 13 of the 19 questions asked in the survey were statistically significant at the .01 level, and often negatively correlated with the intent to leave within the next two years. This negative correlation means as the likelihood of individuals leaving the field in the next two years increased as the variables measured decreased. The ranges of the correlation coefficient scores vary from slightly correlated to moderately correlated. In other words, these scores indicate a relationship exists between intent to leave and the statistically significant measured variables.

Table 4 reports the Pearson correlation coefficient score between the five factors and the question, “I can see myself remaining in a student affairs related position for a significant portion of my career.”



**Table 4**

*Results From a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of Remaining in the Student Affairs Field and Study Variables*

Variable	<i>r</i>
General Retention	
14. My work fulfills a sense of calling	.299**
15. Remaining in the SA Field for a majority of my career	-
Role Expectations	
17. Job description accurately matches job duties	.220*
18. The number of hours I work is manageable	.329**
19. Expectations are clear and communicated	.383**
Financial Compensation	
20. Pay matches educational qualification	.327**
21. My pay is competitive	.243*
22. I am satisfied by my benefits	.303**
Burnout and Emotional Investment	
23. Regularly perform tasks/assignments outside of job duties	-.099
24. I find my work emotional draining	-.278**
25. Work and personal life are well balanced	.471**
26. Sufficient time to pursue interests outside of my career	.454**
Value and Importance	
27. Work is acknowledged and valued by others	.312**
28. Work contributes to the mission of the institution	.103
29. Work is meaningful and impactful	.217*
Supervisor Influence	
30. Supervisor provides regular and useful feedback	.120
31. Supervisor values my feedback	.143
32. Supervisor trusts and empowers me to do my work	.138
33. I view my supervisor as a mentor	.161
34. Relationship with supervisor is developmental	.076

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

As shown in Table 4, nine of the 19 questions were significant at the .01 level and often positively correlated to individuals seeing themselves in the student affairs field for a significant portion of their career. Each of these correlation coefficient scores ranges from slightly correlated to moderately correlated. The results of Table 3 and Table 4

together indicate there are items in each of these five factors that have a relationship with intent to leave and retention. Additionally, the open, short answer question did not provide any additional significant contexts or factors relating to the retention of student affairs professionals. Chapter 5 will discuss these relationships between variables in detail.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

Recent reports and studies have shown professionals in student affairs struggle to remain in the field for the majority of their career (Chamberlain et al., 2022; Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016) Further, the student affairs field is at risk of losing another portion of its workforce in the coming years (Chamberlain et al., 2022). Thus, understanding factors that could influence a student affairs professional's retention is paramount. Following a discussion of the results, implications for practice and future research will outline possible changes that could help to improve the retention of student affairs professionals.

The relatively low means for intent to leave indicates a large portion of this population is unlikely to leave the student affairs field in the near future. Further, 62% of participants responded they were either very unlikely or unlikely to leave the field within the next two years. Additionally, 63.9% ( $n = 69$ ) of participants strongly agreed or agreed that they could see themselves staying in a student affairs related position for the majority of their careers. While this is a good indication of low intent to leave, a plurality of participants exists that could be looking to exit the field. Further, 36.1% ( $n = 39$ ) of participants neither disagreed nor agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that they could see themselves staying in a student affairs related position for the majority of their careers. This seemingly confirms NASPA's findings of roughly 40% of student affairs professionals being unsure if they will remain in the field (Chamberlain et al., 2022).

Interestingly, nine of the 19 questions surveyed were statistically significant at the .01 level when correlated with the question of remaining in the student affairs field for the majority of their career (see Table 4 in Chapter 4). However, the correlation between the likelihood of leaving in two years and study variables resulted in 13 of the 19 questions surveyed being statistically significant at the .01 level (see Table 3 in Chapter 4).

This study reveals that there is a positive correlation between individuals who foresee themselves staying in the student affairs field for the majority of their career and clear role expectations, good financial compensation, and low burnout and emotional investment. This means that as the likelihood an individual reported seeing themselves remaining in the field increased, the more likely the participant was to agree with clear role expectations, good financial compensation, and low burnout and emotional investment. This means student affairs role expectations, financial compensation, and low levels of burnout and emotional investment could all positively impact the retention of these professionals. The negative correlations between professionals who are likely to leave the student affairs field in two years and their low feelings of importance and poor supervision could negatively impact their retention in the student affairs field. This negative correlation means as the likelihood of a participant leaving the field in two years increased, their feelings of importance and supervision decreased.

Individuals who could see themselves in the student affairs field for a majority of their career were slightly positively correlated to the number of hours of work being manageable as well as having clear and communicated job expectations. Meanwhile, those who were more likely to leave in the next two years were slightly negatively

correlated to the number of hours of work being manageable as well as having clearly communicated job expectations, meaning the more likely someone saw themselves staying in the student affairs field, the more likely they were to report manageable work hours and clear expectations. Those who were more likely to leave the field reported unmanageable work hours and poorly communicated expectations.

The moderate positive correlation between remaining in the student affairs field and having a healthy work–life balance, as well as having sufficient time to pursue outside interests, emphasizes this idea of having manageable workloads. Further, those who were more likely to leave the field were negatively correlated to having a balance between their work and their lives. While correlations do not indicate causal links, it is reasonable to make conjectures based on the results of the correlation. Thus, allowing professionals to have spaces outside of work and not complete work-related tasks outside of working hours could be a factor that influences a student affairs professional to remain in the field.

Another factor that could potentially impact a student affairs professional's retention is financial compensation and benefits. There was a slight positive correlation between student affairs professionals' pay matching the educational qualification of their job as well as being satisfied with their benefits. However, individuals who were more likely to leave within two years were slightly negatively correlated to their pay matching their educational qualification, believing their pay was competitive, and being satisfied with their benefits. If colleges and universities can provide compensation and benefits that match the needed educational and experiential requirements, then those working in

student affairs may be more inclined to stay rather than seek a job outside of student affairs.

A few factors were only statistically significant to the participants who were interested in leaving the field within the next two years. A negative correlation exists between intent to leave and having their work acknowledged and valued by others, as well as with seeing their work as meaningful and impactful to those they are working with. Professionals whose work does not feel valued or acknowledged by others in the institution may struggle to see why they should continue to work in an unrewarding role. Institutions and supervisors should look to acknowledge, celebrate, and encourage those working in student affairs. Increasing awareness across campus and promoting the importance of the work done by these professionals could help individuals feel like their institutions value their work and fulfill a necessary space on the campus. Hopefully, increasing this awareness and value creates a working environment where people feel inclined to stay.

The existence of the slight negative correlation between wanting to leave in two years and having a supervisor who values feedback, as well as trusting individuals to do their work, could indicate poor supervision could lead to the attrition of student affairs professionals. This is consistent with D'Arcangelo's (2022) findings of needing a platform for practice where they can make mistakes while still having support from supervisors. Supervisors who do not trust their supervisees or micromanage their work could be pushing student affairs professionals out of the field.

## **Implications for Practice**

The combination of these results, as well as the extensive research as to why individuals are leaving, should encourage colleges and universities to evaluate their practices in order to help retain student affairs professionals. First, it is important to provide a job that is clear and contains a manageable workload. The findings of Chamberlain et al. (2022) and Renn and Jensen-Anger (2008) both indicate student affairs professionals can often struggle to understand their roles. However, the results here indicate that those who understand their role expectations are more likely to stay. Thus, supervisors should be able to provide detailed, clear job descriptions to those working in all areas of student affairs. Additionally, the amount of work given to employees should be manageable enough to complete during working hours. By being provided clear, manageable expectations, student affairs professionals can know the expectations and requirements of their jobs, hopefully allowing them to excel in their work rather than doing tasks unrelated to their job.

Secondly, individuals working in student affairs need to have pay and benefits that match the needed educational and experience requirements. Marshall et al. (2016) reported low levels of pay satisfaction. Taken alongside the Compass Report (Chamberlain et al., 2022), which reports student affairs pay not being competitive, it becomes paramount to raise the financial compensation of these employees. Colleges and universities should work to raise the pay of student affairs workers to pay these highly educated and experienced professionals competitively. While budgets and financial restrictions could hinder this suggestion, institutions should evaluate the cost difference between paying current employees more and the cost of having to repeatedly interview,

hire, and train new individuals. Additionally, if a pay increase is not available, added benefits could help supplement a financial compensation package. Things such as paid time off, tuition waivers, meal plans, and many other benefits could bridge the gap between low pay and high levels of education. By making these changes, colleges and universities could positively impact their student affairs professionals by showcasing their value and worth through their financial compensation.

Finally, student affairs professionals should seek to find a balance between work and home in an effort to create fewer feelings of burnout. Individuals should pursue other interests and hobbies outside of their work. This will help create spaces and moments where professionals can recharge and be personally fulfilled outside of their work. Additionally, supervisors can promote this by allowing additional time off, modeling a separation between work and home, and encouraging their workers to pursue other relationships and interests outside of their work with students. Moreover, for individuals who have late night events or serve on on-call rotations, giving them the next morning or day off after a late evening could be beneficial in helping student affairs professionals manage their workloads. Creating these spaces and hopefully incorporating good rhythms of work and rest will help create healthy routines for student affairs professionals and lead to better retention of these important college employees.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Given the results of this study, along with the existing literature, more research could take place to better understand the retention of student affairs employees. First, more exploration into the factors surrounding the retention of student affairs employees is important and urgent. With the concerning number of individuals who are looking into



leaving the student affairs field, it becomes increasingly important to understand ways to improve their work experiences. This study suggests that clear role expectations, good financial compensation and benefits, and low levels of burnout and emotional investment can all positively impact the retention of student affairs employees. However, many more factors may influence student affairs professionals' decision to stay or leave the field.

Furthermore, this study took a general look at the student affairs field as a whole. The responsibilities, tasks, and nature of work can differ drastically depending on the position. A further breakdown into the different roles (e.g., Residence Life, Career Service, or Student Activities) could provide insight into different factors that could influence people's choices to stay.

Finally, since the separation between work and home seems to influence student affairs professionals to stay in the field, a deep, rich explanation of their practices could benefit others in the community. Studying the habits and routines of individuals who possess a healthy balance between their jobs and personal lives could help others improve their boundaries and create a life where work is no longer the dominating force. Providing further research in this area could help others to have fewer feelings of burnout and become better at managing their emotional involvement.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations exist in this study looking at the retention of student affairs professionals. The sample was largely from professionals working at small, private, faith-based institutions. Thus, this sample does not represent many other professionals who work at larger, public, non-faith-based institutions. Including professionals working in student affairs at larger, public, non-faith-based institutions would provide a more diverse

sampling and allow for a better understanding regarding retention of student affairs professionals across the large higher education landscape.

Secondly, this study only looks at five potential factors influencing the retention of student affairs professionals. Many other factors outside of role expectations, financial compensation, burnout and emotional investment, value and importance, and supervisor influence could be influencing these professionals' retention. Qualitative studies providing a rich description of student affairs professionals' experiences could provide a rich description of the other factors influencing their retention.

Finally, this current study did not factor in any demographics as part of its analysis. Different genders, racial and ethnic minorities, or individuals of different ages could all have different experiences within the student affairs profession. Further research looking into different populations and their experience could provide contextual data to better support these professionals.

## **Conclusion**

The student affairs profession is at risk of losing a significant population of its workers (Chamberlain et al., 2022). Additionally, the student affairs profession has struggled to retain employees, leading to a high attrition rate (Lorden, 1998; Marshall et al., 2016). Those who have left the field often cite unclear job expectations, high levels of burnout and emotional investment, low levels of institutional value and importance, and the lack of professional advancement as their reasons for leaving (Bichsel et al., 2022; Chamberlain et al., 2022; Ellis, 2021; Marshall et al., 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Salle, 2022; Silver & Jakeman, 2014). While an abundance of research on the attrition of student affairs professionals exists, there is little research regarding the retention of these

important university employees. This study begins to help fill the gap in the literature that exists by examining student affairs professionals' retention. This study sought to better understand the retention of student affairs employees by asking: What factors influence the retention of student affairs professionals?

The data in this study indicate clear role expectations, good financial compensation and benefits, as well as a healthy balance between work and personal life could positively impact the retention of student affairs employees. However, poor supervision, the lack of acknowledgment for their work, and feelings of their work being unimportant could negatively impact the retention of student affairs professionals. These highly educated and experienced professionals working in student affairs provide important services to undergraduate students navigating their college years. Due to this highly impactful work, it becomes important to continue supporting and advocating for student affairs professionals in hopes of keeping them in their positions and doing important work.

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**Appendix A**  
**Survey Questions**

1. Gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
2. Institutional Size
  - a. Small (0-3,000 undergraduate students)
  - b. Midsize (3,000-10,000 undergraduate students)
  - c. Large (10,000+ undergraduate students)
3. Institutional Type
  - a. Private Faith-Based
  - b. Private Non-Faith Based
  - c. Public
  - d. Two-year
4. Position Level
  - a. Entry Level
  - b. Mid-Level
  - c. Senior Level
5. How many years have you been in your current position?
  - a. 0-3 years
  - b. 3-5 years

c. 5+ years

6. How many years have you worked in student affairs (development)

a. 0-3 years

b. 3-5 years

c. 5+ years

7. How like are you to leave the student affairs field in the next two years?

Very Unlikely      1      2      3      4      5      Very Likely

8. I often think about what it would be like to leave the student affairs field.

Strongly Disagree    1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

9. I am interested in looking for a new job or experience outside of the student affairs field.

Strongly Disagree    1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

10. I do not want to leave my current position anytime soon.

Strongly Disagree    1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

11. It is likely that I seek other jobs outside of student affairs in the near future.

Strongly Disagree    1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

12. I would recommend a career in student affairs (development).

Strongly Disagree    1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

13. If I had the opportunity, I would apply for my job again.

Strongly Disagree    1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

14. I feel my work fulfills a sense of calling.

Strongly Disagree    1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree



15. I can see myself remaining in a student affairs related position for a significant portion of my career.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

16. There are opportunities for me to advance within the student affairs field.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

17. My job description accurately matches my performed job duties.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

18. The numbers of hours I work is manageable.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

19. The expectations of my job are clear and communicated.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

20. My pay matches the necessary educational qualifications needed for my job.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

21. My pay is competitive compared to other jobs requiring equal experience and education.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

22. I am satisfied by the benefits I receive through my job (e.g., free use of facilities, tuition waivers, housing, meal plans, professional development opportunities).

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

23. I regularly have to perform tasks/assignments outside of my regular job duties.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

24. I often find my work emotionally draining.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

25. My work and personal life are well balanced.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

26. I have sufficient time to pursue other interests outside of my career.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

27. My work is acknowledged and valued by others at the institution.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

28. My work contributes to the mission of my institution.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

29. I find my work to be meaningful and impactful to those I work with (coworkers and/or students).

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

30. My supervisor provides regular and useful feedback to me.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

31. My supervisor values my feedback.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

32. My supervisor trusts and empowers me to do my work.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

33. I view my supervisor as a mentor.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

34. My relationship with my supervisor is developmental.

Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

35. Are there any other factors contributing towards your retention not discussed in this survey? If yes, please record your response in detail below.

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent**

You are invited to participate in research studying the factors influencing retention of student affairs professionals. You were invited to be a potential participant because of your status as a student affairs professional and as a member of the Association for Christians in Student Development (ACSD). You will be completing a survey discussing factors influencing your retention as a student affairs employee. Question areas will include general retention, role expectations, financial compensation, burnout and emotional investment, value and importance, as well as supervisor influence. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop taking the survey at any point.

Thank you for taking interest in this research. Your experiences and thoughts are extremely valuable. The study is being conducted by Jonah Tews as part of his graduate program in conjunction with Taylor University, and is supervised by Dr. Drew Moser

#### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to understand the factors influencing the retention of student affairs employees. The study will explore how role expectorations, financial

compensation, burnout and emotional investment, value and important, and supervisor influence affect the retention of student affairs employees.

#### PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey via Microsoft Forms. Your participation in the study will be completed when you click the “submit” button at the end of the survey. All data collected will be analyzed by the researcher.

#### VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University or any of the researchers involved in this study. If you choose to not complete the survey or withdraw after completing the survey, you may do so without repercussions or penalty.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential, and no identifiable information is required for your participation in this study. Any potential data possibly indicating your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. Data and information will be shared and discussed only with thesis supervisor, methodologist, and thesis committee.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY

The risks of completing the survey is potentially being uncomfortable answer questions and reflecting on individual experiences. If you experience stress or discomfort answering the questions, you may withdraw from the study and not complete the survey at any point with no repercussions or penalties.

#### BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY

The benefit to participation in this study is the opportunity to provide information regarding the factors influencing retention in the student affairs field, which can help to improve workplace satisfaction. Additionally, participation will provide the researcher insights as to what factors highly affect retention of student affairs professionals and can lead to recommendations for better retention practices.

#### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

By clicking "next" you consent to the researcher to utilize your responses as data, and you are agreeing to participate in the study and consenting to being at least 18 years of age.

Inquiries regarding the nature of the research, his/her rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to his/her participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or IRB member, Kris Johnson, Director of Sponsored Programs, at [kris\\_johnson1@taylor.edu](mailto:kris_johnson1@taylor.edu).

Additional inquiries can be directed to Jonah Tews at [Jonah\\_tews@taylor.edu](mailto:Jonah_tews@taylor.edu) or Dr. Drew Moser, faculty advisor, at [drew\\_moser@taylor.edu](mailto:drew_moser@taylor.edu)

