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The Lived Experience of New Community College Student Affairs Professionals

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THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NEW COMMUNITY COLLEGE
STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

by

Eric L. Mullen

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NEW COMMUNITY COLLEGE
STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

Eric L. Mullen, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2018

This qualitative study explores the experiences of new student affairs professionals who have begun their careers at community colleges. Research in the field of higher education has examined the preparation and socialization of new professionals within the field of higher education student affairs. However, this body of research has primarily focused on the experiences of those who go on to work in four-year colleges and universities. Little has been examined regarding those who graduate from these programs and whose first professional role is in a community college setting.

Through this phenomenological inquiry, the participants share rich details about their socialization and transition experiences as new student affairs professionals in a community college. The four areas concerning the participants’ experiences that have emerged from this research include how participants find entry into the field of higher education and their first professional role at a community college, how they experience their work environments and serving community college students, and how they describe the student affairs viewpoint within the community college setting. The findings from this research suggests that graduate preparation programs and community college student affairs units can improve the preparation and socialization for this segment of new professionals.
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Eric L. Mullen
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The community college occupies a unique and important position in the landscape of higher education. It enrolls nearly half of all college students taking courses in the United States, and maintains a distinct and varied portfolio of missions compared to other post-secondary education institutions (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2014). The community college is a regional institution, drawing students largely from its immediate geographic area. It serves the students of its surrounding communities through coursework and training programs, as well as meeting the needs of other regional stakeholders, including industry leaders and business owners, secondary education systems, and the community in general through a myriad of programs and services.

The portfolio of programs typically found in the community college includes transfer pathways toward baccalaureate degree attainment, training and certificates that lead to employment, opportunities for students to get ahead on college degrees while either in high school or as enrollees at four-year institutions, opportunities for students to take classes or training for personal gain, and service programs that seek to meet the unique needs of the surrounding region (Cohen et al., 2014). As such, Cohen et al. share that the community college has often been criticized as trying to be all things to all people, and not succinctly focusing its resources on specific outcomes. Conversely, the community college has also been recognized and lauded as an important egalitarian institution in our society. This recognition is based on the community college’s history of providing higher education access to any individual seeking this
opportunity, while also responding readily to the changing needs of its surrounding communities (Shafer, 2013).

Those who work in the community college attempt to advance this ambitious agenda by providing a full array of academic and job training programs, as well as providing other services and programs that meet the needs of their immediate community. As with any higher education institution, there are both inherent challenges and rewards associated with working at the community college. As an example of rewards, community college administrators report higher levels of morale than their counterparts at four-year institutions (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000). Concerning challenges, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) developed a comprehensive report documenting the most pressing issues facing the community college (21st-Century Commission, 2014). These challenges include declining student academic readiness levels, widening gaps between available trained and credentialed employees and the growing talent needs of our economy, low student graduation rates, and low levels of community and regional support for the resources required to address these issues. These challenges call for passionate and skilled professionals who have actively evaluated their professional fit and readiness to work in this environment, and are prepared to address the challenges and embrace the rewards inherent to this higher education institution.

This study seeks to better understand the experiences of one professional segment within the community college: new student affairs professionals. Although there is research into the preparation (Mather, Smith, & Skipper, 2010), professional fit (Buchanan, 2012), and transition and socialization (Renn & Hodges, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008) of those who train in graduate higher education/student affairs programs and then work in four-year institutions, there is little regarding the experience of those who begin their careers in community colleges.
(Hornak, Ozaki, & Lunceford, 2016; Latz, Ozaki, Royer, & Hornak, 2016; Latz & Royer, 2014; Lunceford, 2014; Royer, Mulvihill, & Latz, 2016; ). Therefore, the focus of my study is to better understand the experiences of new community college student affairs professionals. Generating a stronger awareness of this specific professional population could assist in the recruitment and retention of new community college student affairs professionals, help students in graduate programs assess their professional fit for a role in the community college, and inform the preparation and training for future professionals that may improve their readiness and socialization to work in this setting.

**Background**

A primary outcome for college student affairs preparation programs is to graduate new professionals who are well suited and trained to improve college student development and learning (Protivnak, Paylo, & Mercer, 2013). Although a relatively young profession, there have been various inquiries into the curriculum and methods used in the training and preparation of future student affairs professionals. This body of research has focused on many facets, including profiles of graduate students (Forney, 1994; Taub & McEwen, 2006), matters of diversity and multiculturalism (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002; Talbot, 1996; Talbot & Kocarek, 1997), professional competencies for new professionals and the extent to which these competencies match what is needed in the field (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2008; Robertson, 1999), and the transition and socialization experiences as new professionals move into their initial roles (Hirschy, Boyle, Wilson, Liddell, & Pasquesi, 2015; Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, & Boyle, 2014; Mather, Smith, & Skipper, 2010; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).
Concerning the profiles of those who enroll in student affairs preparation programs, many studies found attributes and demographics that were common across these groups of students. For example, several studies examined graduate student profiles and found that the majority of students were female, White, and that their mean age was in the range of mid to late twenties (Forney, 1994; Hunter, 1992; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Aside from studies that specifically examined the profiles of those who enroll in higher education/student affairs preparation programs, this demographic composition is consistent in participant data from studies that have analyzed other related phenomena among new student affairs professionals (Hephner LeBanc, 2010; Lambert, 2008; Mather, Smith, & Skipper, 2010; Mertz, Strayhorn, & Eckman, 2012). For instance, in a study of professional development needs for 269 new professionals, 70.2% were female and 84% identified as White (Cliente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloan, 2006). Concerning more recent inquiries, no studies were found in the last five years that addressed the profile of higher education/student affairs graduate program students or new professionals. Based on the information available, it appears that the populations who enroll in preparation programs or are new professionals are comprised of a majority of White women who are in their mid to late twenties.

Another major area of inquiry into higher education/student affairs graduate student preparation is congruence between preparation curriculum and the competencies needed to be successful in the field. These examinations have addressed this inquiry from various perspectives. For example, several studies have examined this matter from the viewpoint of new professionals (Mather, Smith, & Skipper, 2010; Waple, 2000; Waple, 2006) and their supervisors (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Reynolds, 2011; Robertson, 1999). Other researchers have studied the opinions and attitudes of mid-level managers and senior student affairs officers
(Bukard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Herdlein, 2004), graduate program faculty (Herdlein, Kline, Boquard, & Haddad, 2010; Young & Janosik, 2007), as well as a comparison of perspectives between graduate faculty and senior student affairs officers (Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2008).

Finally, student affairs competencies have been examined through the use of a literature meta-analysis. In two studies using the meta-analysis approach, the body of higher education/student affairs research was examined to identify the common and salient traits, qualities, skills, and knowledge sets needed to be successful in the field (Herdlein, Riefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). There are varied origins and sources (e.g., graduate programs, professional organizations, historic documents) that publish lists and publications regarding the requisite competencies for the field of student affairs. Although there is not consensus regarding a singular and common source for these competencies, the literature suggests there is general agreement among key constituencies that the competencies central to graduate programs are engendered well among new professionals and are relevant to the field (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Waple, 2006).

A final major grouping of research regarding the field of higher education/student affairs preparation is related to the experiences and socialization of student affairs graduates as they transition into their first professional role. This research has been approached from several angles including examinations of the job search and hiring processes, the transitional experiences of new professionals as they move from their graduate program into their first job, and their ongoing professional development needs. Cliente et al. (2006) asked new professionals directly about their professional development needs. They concluded that the majority of the professional development needs for new professional were linked to their relationships with their supervisors. Of the needs ranked in the top six levels, two related directly to supervision (receiving adequate transportation and assistance).
support and understanding job expectations), and the others could be addressed by supervisors (fostering student learning, moving up in the field of student affairs, enhancing supervision skills, and developing multicultural competencies). Renn and Hodges (2007) and Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) examined the professional transition experiences of new student affairs professionals throughout their first year in their new roles. Other inquiries have examined the experiences of new professionals through the job search and hiring process (Banas, 2010; Lombardi, 2013), factors that lead to attrition among new professionals (Buchanan, 2012), and the role that professional associations play in the experience of new professionals (Janosik, Carpenter, & Creamer, 2006).

**Problem Statement**

Higher education/student affairs preparation programs are positioned in four-year settings, making these institutions the training grounds for student affairs professionals as they apply their knowledge and skills in graduate assistantships and internships at their respective institutions. Consequently, graduate student experiences in these programs, and the context in which they are most exposed, are predominantly related to the four-year collegiate environment (Latz & Royer, 2014). In the course of my literature review, only a few studies were found that examined the experiences of new professionals specifically in the community college. For example, Latz and Royer (2014) surveyed graduates from master’s programs in higher education/student affairs and found that courses on the community college were only required 4.8% of the time and made available as an elective only 17.56% of the time. In another study of community college student affairs professionals, Lunceford, Ozaki, and Hornak (2013) found that, of those who had obtained a master’s degree in higher education/student affairs (72% of the
sample), only 12.4% indicated that their program had done a good job of preparing them to work in the community college setting.

Overall, sparse representation of the community college perspective is common in higher education student affairs literature, unless found in a journal dedicated specifically to the community college. This is concerning given that the community college represents nearly 40% of all undergraduate enrollments in the United States and that 46% of bachelor degree recipients were community college students at some point in their higher education experience (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015).

As an example of this lack of community college perspective in higher education literature, Townsend, Donaldson, and Wilson (2005) found that only a small percentage of articles reviewed in five primary higher education research journals between 1990 and 2003 were related to the community college. Only 2% referenced the community college in the title of the article, and only 8% had this reference in either the body of the article or title. Despite its scant representation in general higher education research journals, the community college is a substantial fixture in the American post-secondary system. Given that a significant number of higher education preparation programs graduates are hired by community colleges as student affairs professionals, graduate students should be exposed to the community college during their training.

Other research has been conducted that examines the higher education/student affairs graduate experience, the socialization of graduates into their first professional role, alignment of student affairs graduate curriculum with professional standards, both mid-level management and senior student affairs officers’ expectations for graduate students’ competencies, and other
related topics. The vast majority of this research has been centered on those who work in a four-year institutional environment or through the lens of this institutional type. In some cases, research on higher education/student affairs preparation and professional socialization has been segmented and examined by a specific institutional type. Examples include inquiries into student affairs experiences in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, & Strayhorn, 2008; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006; Schuh, 2003) and private and religiously affiliated institutions (Estanek, Herdlelin, & Harris, 2011; Mertz, Strayhorn, & Eckman, 2012; Morris, Haseltine, & Williams, 2007). However, the community college has not regularly been included as an institutional variable among inquiries into the preparation or experience of new student affairs professionals. This study seeks to help fill this gap in the literature by presenting an inquiry into the experiences of new community college student affairs professionals.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine and present the lived experiences of new community college student affairs professionals. The primary issue this study seeks to address is the lack of knowledge and understanding regarding this professional population. My objective is to add to the body of literature in which little is currently known regarding those who complete a master’s program in higher education and start their career at a community college. The secondary objective is to inform practice regarding the training and socialization of new community college student affairs professionals. The groups and organizations primarily involved in this work are higher education/student affairs graduate programs, student affairs professional development organizations, and hiring managers in community college student services and student affairs units.
The primary research question in this study is: What are the lived experiences of new student affairs professionals as they become socialized into their first professional role in the community college? From the perspective of new professionals, I seek to understand how they experienced their professional socialization into their first student affairs role in a community college, and how they would describe their pathway of entry into this setting. Also central to this inquiry, I seek to understand how new student affairs professionals describe their decision-making process to work in a community college.

**Methods**

A qualitative design will be used for this research study. Creswell (2007) recommends the use of qualitative research methods when the researcher seeks to make the world, or the phenomenon that a subject is experiencing, more visible. This method was selected as an appropriate methodology given the limited amount of previous studies represented in the body of higher education literature regarding those who work in a community college as new student affairs professionals.

To better understand the socialization experiences of new community college student affairs professionals, a phenomenological approach will be used for this study. The purpose of phenomenological research extends beyond developing a description of a shared experience alone. Creswell, Hanson, Plano and Morales (2007) state that the purpose of phenomenology is to reduce the shared experience into the universal essence of what is experienced and how it is experienced. In depth, semi-structured interviews will be used to capture narratives that illustrate the meaning making of a shared experience among this professional population (Seidman, 2013). Although an exact number of participants is not explicitly set for this study, a range of eight to ten participants will be sought as an initial goal. Ultimately, the final number of
participants for this study will be determined based on reaching a level of saturation, the point where no new or relevant information comes forward that informs the research question (Saumure & Given, 2008).

**Socialization Framework**

To frame my study, I will use the Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Graduate Socialization Framework as a conceptual lens. Utilizing a model specific to the graduate and socialization experience will provide a framework with which to categorize and codify the experiences shared by the study participants in a known model. This framework illustrates the process of professional role acquisition that occurs in graduate preparation programs and along new professionals’ transitions into their first jobs. In addition, this framework will allow the data and potential findings to be clarified and explained through a known and established construct and provide context in relation to associated research.

This framework details the experiences in which students engage in as they move from prospective student into and through their graduate program, and then into their first novice professional position in which they achieve role acquisition in their chosen field (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). (See figure 1.) At the center of the model is the graduate program experience, which includes the institutional culture and socialization processes specific to this program (assistantships, practicum experiences, mentor programs, etc.). Surrounding the graduate program are engagements that students may have with professional communities, as well as those in their personal communities, which can have an influence on their role acquisition and the development of their professional identities. More details regarding this model are presented in Chapter III.
This framework aligns well with the research question central to my study, as I anticipate that participants will share insights that connect their decisions to enter the field of higher education/student affairs (and specifically the community college environment) with influential relationships, previous academic experiences, involvement in professional organizations, and other social and professional engagements. This inquiry will reveal their perspectives regarding their career development and professional socialization process.
Defining the Experience

The socialization experience of new community college student affairs graduates as they move into their first professional role is the primary focus of this study. Although this could potentially be defined by a specific time frame, it is not a singular event. A graduate student’s transition into their first professional role, and their related socialization into the field of student affairs, occurs over many experiences and a considerable amount of time. This socialization experience is shaped by events, engagements, and relationships that occur prior to, throughout, and after they complete their graduate preparation program. Once hired, this socialization experience continues through involvement in professional development organizations and communities, relationships formed with new colleagues, and the accumulation of experiences and knowledge that eventually moves a new professional into the status of a seasoned professional. This ongoing process is illustrated in detail in the socialization framework used in this study. The Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Graduate Socialization Framework describes a complex web of relationships, learning, and engagements that students experience before, during, and after graduate preparation, as well as into their first professional role. All of these matters shape how they experience their transition and socialization into a profession. That said, the resources and time afforded for this study can only effectively consider a more defined and explicit section of this socialization experience.

To frame the scope of this research, it will be important to clarify and define what will be considered germane to this inquiry. As such, I will focus my inquiry on how the participants experience the start of their work in the community college up until the time of our interview. Through the interview protocol (Appendix I), I will ask the participants to describe their current role and the nature of their work, and how they chose the field of student affairs and how they
came to work in the community college. Mostly importantly, I will ask them to share their experience regarding their transition into this first role. I want them to describe their transition and socialization experiences, relate what have been their most salient involvements, where they have experienced challenges and successes, and what relationships have been most relevant during this time frame. I assume the participants will share matters outside of this time frame that have had an important bearing on their transition experience as well. Although these matters may occur outside of the time frame in which I plan to focus, these issues will still be considered germane to the research question and focus of my study. I will need to remain open to the participants guiding the discussion and sharing the matters of most importance from their perspective.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations are defined as the systematic biases inherent in a study and not necessarily in the control of the researcher (Price & Murnan, 2004). In the case of this study, the limitations include the inherent biases that I hold as a student affairs professional who has worked in their field for over 20 years. I will utilize several strategies to minimize the impact of these biases, such as member checking. The types of convenience sampling used in this study will also bear limitations in this study and the subsequent findings. As I will be utilizing methods of sampling, such as the snowball method, I am relying on networks and communication systems over which I have little control. Consequently, the reach of this study to find the most representative pool of participants is limited and could have a bearing on the composition of the sample not fully reflecting the overarching population. This may have an impact on the likelihood of reaching saturation in the data collection process.
In addition to limitations, there are several delimitations in this research as well. Delimitations refer to the choices made by the researcher that restrict the aim, focus, and goals of the study (Price & Murnan, 2004). The delimitations of this study relate primarily to the method and research questions used for this research. This phenomenological study seeks to understand the lived experience of new community college student affairs professionals. As such, the outcomes of this study will not be used to generalize findings across all professionals in this population. Although I would like to see the outcomes of this research inform practice in graduate higher education/student affairs preparation, the student affairs hiring process in a community college, and graduate students’ processes in gauging their fit for a position in the community college, there is not yet enough known to reach these outcomes, nor will there at the conclusion of this study.

The sampling criterion in this study determines the main delimitations of this study. This study will focus on the experiences of student affairs professionals who have been in their role for five years or less, have begun their career at a public community college, and have completed a student affairs or higher education master’s degree. This criterion will exclude some segments of new professionals, including those working in other institutional types, as well as new community college professionals who had previous full-time higher education experience before completing their master’s degree, or those professionals who do not have a higher education/student affairs master’s degree.

**Researcher’s Statement**

My interest in examining the experiences of new community college student affairs professionals is connected to my own experience and background. I am a student affairs professional who has worked in higher education for 20 years. Seventeen of these years have
been in the community college. After I had worked in the field for six years, I enrolled in and completed a student affairs master’s degree. It was during this experience that I became more exposed to the research and literature related to my field. It was also during this time that I realized the general absence of the community college perspective in the body of research and literature related to higher education and student affairs in particular. In class discussions, I constantly found myself interjecting and relating how the matters we were examining varied in the community college setting, or how the composition and makeup of the community college student population may not align fully with what was presented in the research or literature.

This is not to say that the literature, research, and theories were irrelevant to the community college experience. Overall, my graduate experience has significantly increased my awareness and understanding of college student learning and development, and considerably expanded my confidence, knowledge, and skills to effectively work in my profession. Most of what I learned was fully relevant and applicable to my work. After all, the community college is a higher education institution that serves students and provides many of the same academic programs and services offered in four-year colleges and universities.

Also, I recognize that my graduate experience is limited to one viewpoint. Other graduate programs may provide greater exposure to the community college than what I experienced. This exposure may occur through specific academic program outcomes and subsequent coursework and experiences, or through relationships that graduate programs have with regional community colleges to provide hands-on experiences in this institutional type. As an example, a couple of years after I finished my graduate program, the program I attended added an elective course specifically on the community college.
There have been two other experiences that have influenced my interest in this subject area as well. First, I have had the opportunity to host student affairs graduate students for internship and practicum experiences at the community college at which I work. Second, I have taught a course on the community college in a higher education/student affairs master’s program for several semesters. In these experiences, I heard a common theme expressed by these graduate students after either their practicum experience or the course on the community college. They consistently stated that they had not considered the community college a viable place to work until they had one of these experiences. In addition, they expressed that they held perceptions and viewpoints that were not accurate when exposed to a more in depth review of the community college through the course or a practicum experience.

I was very pleased to see many of these students subsequently pursue positions in the community college upon completion of their graduate program. Many of these students have stayed in contact and provided feedback and details regarding their first professional role. I have found that their experience in either the community college course or practicum experience provided a significant engagement that either shaped or reshaped their awareness and knowledge of the community college and provided an opportunity for them to explicitly consider this institutional type as a viable fit for their career preferences and objectives.

As I reviewed the literature related to student affairs higher education preparation and research regarding new student affairs professionals’ socialization experiences, these matters were markedly missing perspectives on those that begin their career in the community college. My intent is to initiate research to uncover and reveal this perspective. To ensure accuracy and trustworthiness in my research, I need to expose, examine, and consider my viewpoints and experiences related to this topic. Of most importance, I need to hold this self-awareness in a
manner that does not cloud, significantly alter, nor misrepresent the voices of those who will participate in this study.

One form of improving the accuracy and trustworthiness of a phenomenological study involves bracketing. This practice separates the researcher’s previous experiences with the subject matter being studied. According to Gearing (2008), bracketing is:

a beguilingly simple term grounded in a profoundly complex concept. At its core, bracketing is a scientific process where a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the essence of a specific phenomenon. This process allows a focused researcher to observe the unfiltered phenomenon as it is at its essence, without the influence of our natural attitude—individual and societal constructions, presumptions, and assumptions.

(p. 63)

As this quote suggests, this practice is easier to define than it is to practice. This section is an effort to initiate my practice of bracketing and develop a commitment to continue this practice throughout this study. It is my objective to be aware of and hold my presumptions, previous experiences, and assumptions at a distance, and subsequently place the participants’ stories in brackets to allow their voices, narratives, and experiences to emerge, be documented, and shared as a new point of view in student affairs research.

I have not explicitly had the experience I seek to uncover. I had a different path into the field of student affairs. Instead of going into a higher education preparation program after completing my undergraduate degree, I worked in the field for some time before deciding to pursue formal training and education in the field of student affairs. My first position in the profession came right after I graduated from my undergraduate program. Although I really
enjoyed my first professional role in this field, I had not identified it as my intended career goal until I had been in my position for more than a year. I then moved into another position and worked for a total of six years before I enrolled in a graduate student affairs preparation program.

Now, as a more experienced professional, I have opportunities to advise and mentor students in their undergraduate experience to explore and consider higher education student affairs pathways, as well as current higher education/student affairs graduate students who are exploring what functional areas and institutional types may suit them best. Also, as a manager, I am in the position to hire new professionals into entry-level roles. I typically place preference on hiring those who have some experience with the community college. This is also a common preferred experience documented in job postings at my institution. It has been my experience that those with previous exposure to the community college understand how it is different from other higher education institutional types, have a greater awareness of the community college’s broad array of missions, programs and student populations, and have a personal alignment and interest to work in this environment. As a result of these experiences, I have a professional interest to better understand the lived experiences of new community college professionals so they may inform my advisement, mentorship, and hiring decisions. In addition, my professional experiences have sparked an interest to conduct research in this area to better inform the communities of professional practice in higher education. This study provides an intersection between my professional experiences, my interest to contribute to the literature, and my passion for supporting and advancing the community college and the students it serves.

Summary

Currently, higher education literature provides research, feedback, and best practices to inform the development of curriculum, methods, training, experiential learning strategies, and
professional development for new student affairs professionals. There are, however, areas in which this body of literature is lacking detail, especially in relation to the community college environment. This is especially true when considering those student affairs professionals who begin their full-time roles in the community college (Latz, Ozaki, Royer, & Hornak, 2016). This study will provide an inquiry into the experience of those in this professional segment.

Conducting an inquiry into these experiences can offer insight for graduate programs and professional development organizations to increase their awareness of this population and use the findings to potentially strengthen their curriculum and preparation methods. In addition, the findings of this study may appeal to senior student affairs officers and hiring managers in community colleges. In order for the community college to play a pivotal role in increasing the number of students who obtain certificates, associate degrees, job training credentials, or successfully transfer to a four-year institution, they must be staffed with passionate, well-trained, and well-positioned student affairs professionals. The findings from this study could assist community college student affairs leadership with details on how to create stronger pathways to career opportunities in their institutions for new professionals who have the skills, values, and alignment to be successful in this setting.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Student affairs professionals play important roles in higher education institutions in recruiting, advising, and supporting students, and in designing programs and services that improve college student learning. Graduate programs and professional development experiences are critical and primary engagements for the development of future professionals to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to advance student learning and success at their future institutions. These programs also help graduate students reflect on and assess their professional goals and skills to ensure they pursue a strong fit in their future higher education roles. This fit assessment emphasizes institutional attributes such as institutional type, size, affiliation, and other qualities.

However, there is one institutional type that appears to be particularly absent in student affairs preparation literature—the community college. In their review of student affairs professionals in the community college, Dalpes, Baston, and Sanchez (2015) conclude that there is a dearth of research regarding the experiences of the new community college student affairs professionals. They state that, “the nuances of work in the community college setting, which are often directly connected to the unique composition of students that exist at an open-access institution, remain largely unexplored from the perspective of entry-level professionals in student affairs at community colleges” (p. 285).

Although there is not much known regarding the specific experiences of new student affairs professionals working in the community college, there is an appreciable amount of research available regarding the general preparation of student affairs professionals and their transition and socialization into their first role. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research on the history of this profession, as well as the preparation and
socialization experiences of new student affairs professionals in higher education. This review will provide an understanding regarding the professional experiences of those who train in a higher education/student affairs program and provide a lens through which the experiences of participants in this study can be considered. In addition, what is currently known about working in the context of the community college will be presented, as well as major attributes and characteristics of the community college as an institutional type. Finally, this chapter will also describe the Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Graduate Socialization Framework, which will be used as a conceptual framework for this study.

**Overview of the Higher Education Student Affairs Profession**

The roles and functions of student affairs professionals have evolved over time in terms of scope and complexity. During the 1700’s, at the start of the American higher education movement, college presidents, faculty, and tutors primarily performed what are now considered student affairs roles and functions (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). Initially, college faculty and presidents adopted the approach of *in loco parentis*, which translates as *in place of parents* (Hirt, 2006). In this manner, student affairs duties were administered by higher education professionals serving as surrogate parents, and the aim was to cultivate the academic, moral, and spiritual development of students. This work was comprised of facilitating strict daily schedules for students that included chapel, meals, study hours, physical activity, and some social events (Dungy & Gordon, 2011). As the systems of higher education grew more complex, so did the various roles and functions in colleges and universities.

The student affairs profession was born out of new positions that began to emerge in higher education institutions in the late 1800’s (Waple, 2006). This was the beginning of the dean of students positions. These new roles were necessary to manage the out-of-class student
experiences and behaviors that proved too much for college presidents and faculty to oversee in conjunction with their primary duties. This stemmed from the overall expansion of colleges and universities and a need to manage the increasing number of students who were attending these institutions.

During the formation of the student affairs profession, standards of practice and graduate preparation programs began to take shape. The origin of student affairs as a profession can be traced to national meetings that took place in the early 1900’s among groups of deans of women, deans of men, and student union directors (Waple, 2006). At national and regional meetings for deans of women and men, and student union workers, professional associations groups were initiated and, soon thereafter, the first college personnel degree was awarded by Columbia University in 1918 (Evans & Reason, 2001). The main purpose of higher education/student affairs preparation programs is to develop competent practitioners for the field (Kuk & Banning, 2009). These programs began to expand, training professionals to enter higher education in roles that are now considered student services and student affairs functions. As time went on, a higher education/student affairs master’s degree became the preferred (and in many cases, the required) credential to enter the field of student affairs (Forney, 1994; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Tyrell, 2014).

As student affairs roles developed over time, standards of practice were more clearly defined. An important event concerning the initiation of these standards occurred with the publication of the Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV) in 1937. This document had a significant role in defining the profession and its standards of practice. Evans and Reason (2001) cite this document as more than just an outline of the profession’s major roles and functions. More importantly, the SPPV was a declaration of the profession’s theoretical foundations and
prevailing values. It was in this document that the focus on holistic student development was declared a priority outcome of the student affairs profession, and the mantle of working as an educator, akin to those in the classroom, took hold.

The overall number and complexity of student affairs positions, roles, and functions increased as the number of students attending colleges and universities boomed. Between 1700 and 1900, less than 5% of the United States population between the ages of 18 and 22 enrolled in higher education (Thelin & Gasman, 2011). However, during the twentieth century, after two centuries of minimal growth, a boom in enrollment occurred and, by the 1970’s, more than 50% of Americans in this age range enrolled in college. As enrollments increased, and the landscape of higher education grew more complex, so did the roles of student affairs professionals. *In loco parentis* was replaced with new models of engaging with students, and professional development organizations began to describe the primary role of student affairs professionals as more than just an overseer of student behavior. Rather, the profession began to assert their role as that of an educator, much like the deliberate learning that takes place in the classroom (Keeling, 2004).

Primarily through engagements outside of, or in support of, classroom learning, student affairs professionals act as facilitators of students’ interpersonal, social, moral, spiritual, and professional development (Bickel & Lake, 1997).

**Higher Education/Student Affairs Professional Preparation**

There are three primary areas of research surrounding student affairs professional preparation (Mather, Smith, & Skipper, 2010). These include the profiles and attributes of those who enroll in higher education/student affairs preparation programs, the competencies and skills needed for success in this field (and assessment regarding how well preparation programs have engendered these skills and competencies), and the socialization experiences of graduate students
and new professionals. The following sections will explore these three major areas of higher education student affairs research and provide an overview regarding the findings and common themes among these inquiries.

**Profiles of student affairs graduate students.** Several studies have examined the composition of students enrolled in higher education programs and analyzed their demographics, attitudes, and attributes. In an early inquiry into this population, Hunter (1992) surveyed students enrolled in his higher education program over the course of several years. Of the 93 respondents, 67 were women and 11% represented an ethnic minority group. Age was not reported in this study. In a similar examination with a larger sample size, Forney (1994) used a demographic and attitudinal questionnaire, along with a learning style inventory to survey 253 first and second-year higher education/student affairs students across 16 randomly selected programs. Forney found that most students were female (66%), a clear majority were white (91%), and their mean age was 28. More than 20 years later, Taub and McEwen (2006) surveyed 300 students across 24 randomly selected graduate programs to better understand who enrolls in these programs, and what drew them into the field of student affairs. The findings in their study were very similar to those found in Hunter’s (1992) and Forney’s (1994) research. Taub and McEwen (2006) found that approximately three fourths of the respondents were women, 89% identified as White, and 68% were 26 or younger. This demographic composition is consistent in participant data across other related studies that examined the preparation of student affairs professionals and the experiences of new student affairs professionals in their first jobs (Cliente et al., 2006; Hephner LeBanc, 2010; Lambert, 2008; Mather, Smith, & Skipper, 2010; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Robertson, 1999; Stiles, 2012). It appears that the composition of higher education/student affairs graduate student enrollments has changed little since the early
1990’s, that is, higher education/student affairs programs are mostly comprised of White women and individuals in their early to mid-twenties.

In addition to demographic data, researchers have examined the biographical attributes and factors that have influenced a student’s decision to pursue a graduate program and career in higher education student affairs. In Forney’s (1994) study of student affairs graduate students, participants cited engagement in student leadership experiences when they were undergraduates as a significant experience that influenced their decision to enter the field of student affairs. They also indicated that they chose to pursue a career in higher education as they found the work environment attractive and wanted to be in a profession that supported college students. In a more recent study of graduate students, Taub and McEwen (2006) found similar attitudes and attributes. Seventy-two percent of the students in their study indicated that they chose to enter the field of student affairs as it was a professional goal to help college students, and the same percentage found higher education an appealing work environment. Their participants also identified involvement in student life and mentorship by a student affairs professional during their undergraduate enrollment as significant factors that influenced their interest to pursue a master’s degree and career in the field of higher education student affairs. In addition to these findings, Taub and McEwen (2006) also confirmed an initial premise of their research—that the field of student affairs does not have a clear point of entry. Students in this study were generally unaware of the student affairs field until late in their undergraduate experience, and more than half of the respondents had applied to graduate programs in other fields before discovering and selecting a higher education/student affairs program.

Concerning the reasons that students enroll in student affairs graduate programs, Mertz, Eckhorn, and Strayhorn (2012) found similar findings to Taub and McEwen (2006). Of the 52
student affairs graduate students in their study, 83% indicated that they were active in student life in their undergraduate experience, and 73% shared that a student affairs professional was a significant influencer in their decision to enter the field. They also found that most of the respondents had a lack of knowledge about student affairs as a career field while pursuing their undergraduate degree. Of the respondents, 70% indicated that they did not have an awareness of the field as undergraduates and revealed that they had not considered it as a career option until very late in their bachelor’s program or that they happened upon the field by accident.

This area of research illustrates some of the common demographics of those who enroll in student affairs preparation programs. Although this research has spanned several decades, it appears that the profile of those who enroll in higher education student affairs programs has not changed much in the intervening years. While gathering research for this study, no specific inquiries into higher education/student affairs program participants were found in the last five years. In addition, there are several biographic attributes that appear consistent among this population. This includes primary influencing factors, such as involvement in student life or mentorship from a student affairs professional, that led students to consider the field of higher education student affairs. Another common theme among this group of new professionals was finding that the pathway into student affairs was hidden or not very clear (Mertz, Eckhorn, & Strayhorn, 2012; Taub & McEwen, 2006).

**Lack of diversity in the profession of student affairs.** Where previous research has revealed the demographics of those enrolled in higher education student affairs, it has also revealed a concern regarding whether or not the composition of student affairs graduate students and new professional matches the growing racial and ethnic diversity represented among students served in higher education. The current literature seems to indicate that the profiles of
new professionals and graduate students does not reflect the diversity of students enrolled in higher education (Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Kelly & Gayles, 2010; Olson, 2010; Pope & Mueller, 2005). This lack of diversity in the pool of graduate students and new professionals is of even greater importance in the community college, as this institutional type serves a significantly higher rate of student diversity than most four-year institutions (Boggs, 2012; Century Foundation, 2013; Cohen et al., 2014).

Higher education student affairs professional development organizations have made it a priority to develop pathways and programs to recruit graduate students and new professionals that represent greater diversity than what is currently represented in the field. Primary efforts include conferences and outreach events, such as NASPA’s (2018) Undergraduate Fellows Program and ACPA’s (2018) Next Gen Conference. Also, while a majority of graduate program enrollees are not members of ethnic or racial minority groups, well-developed training in multiculturalism and inclusive practices can help all program graduates become better positioned to serve the growing diversity among students in higher education. As efforts are made to diversify the recruitment of future student affairs professionals, research in this area has also focused on measuring to what degree diversity, inclusion, and multicultural competence is engaged and engendered in higher education/student affairs programs. These studies have examined the demographics of graduate faculty and their viewpoints regarding diversity and inclusion training in higher education/student affairs programs (Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Pope & Mueller, 2005; Talbot & Kocarek, 1997), as well as how these matters are experienced by graduate students and new professionals (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002; Talbot, 1996).

Talbot (1996) conducted a study among graduate students to understand how diversity training was occurring in their student affairs programs. This study examined how students
evaluated their own levels of knowledge, comfort, and skills working with various student segments, and how they rated the diversity training in their respective programs. Overall, the study revealed that knowledge levels among respondents were below the mid-level rating, indicating a less than favorable knowledge base on matters related to women, people of color, and those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Also, the respondents in this study indicated a discrepancy between how diversity training was represented in the recruitment and admission processes and how this training was actualized within their respective programs. The respondents shared that the actual level of diversity training was lower than how it was represented during their graduate program matriculation process.

A decade later, Gayles and Kelly (2007) found similar outcomes in which students did not feel knowledgeable nor well prepared in the areas of diversity and inclusion upon completion of their graduate program. Their findings centered on three major themes: the instances of diversity courses in their programs, what should be included in these courses, and ways to more strongly link diversity theory to practice. Data was collected through focus group interviews with a total of 37 participants (22 current graduate students and 14 new student affairs professionals). Concerning courses on diversity, only a few respondents had one or more required courses, whereas the others in the study enrolled in programs in which diversity courses were only offered as optional electives in the curriculum. When discussing these courses, the respondents revealed that there was not adequate time to fully explore complex issues related to experiences of privilege and marginalization. The participants also shared an agreement regarding the lack of attention on the application of knowledge in order to serve and support diverse populations in the profession. They found a significant break between theory and practice in this area of their preparation.
This research has also been examined from the perspective of student affairs graduate faculty. Talbot and Kocarek (1997) studied student affairs faculty and their levels of knowledge regarding socially marginalized groups, and skill levels teaching in this subject. Combining data from two different studies, these researchers assessed graduate faculty responses by several variables (e.g., sex, race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity). Overall, the faculty self-reported comfort and skill scores above the midpoint. However, their knowledge scores, as rated by themselves, were below a level needed to teach these subjects to college students. These results seemed inconsistent with their comfort and skill level. The authors suggest that those who are more keenly aware of social justice issues, like the faculty in this study, acknowledge a need to continuously learn more about these issues in an ongoing fashion (and that one never truly arrives at conclusive level of knowledge and awareness). Thus, the researchers believe that the participants actually underrepresented their knowledge level.

Pope and Mueller (2005) examined this issue from the viewpoint of student affairs graduate program faculty as well. Participants were invited to complete a survey that combined a background questionnaire with several instruments measuring multicultural training and competence levels. Concerning demographic variables, women scored higher than men in their multicultural competence, as did faculty of color compared to White faculty. Other variables that had an impact on faculty multicultural competence included identity with a socially marginalized group (i.e., women, people of color, or gay/lesbian/bisexual), as well as how much multicultural training and research in which the faculty had previously engaged. Those who personally identified with a marginalized group had significantly higher multicultural competence scores, as did those with higher levels of engagement with multicultural training or research.
Considering this issue from the viewpoint of minority students seeking entry into the field of student affairs, Flowers and Howard-Hamilton (2002) examined the quality of multicultural life experienced by these students in their graduate preparation programs. The intent of this study was to increase awareness regarding the successful recruitment and retention of diverse candidates in the field of student affairs. This study employed semi-structured interview questions in a focus group model to gain feedback from seven graduate students of color (six African-American students and one Latino student) who were enrolled in predominantly White institutions. The participants in this study expressed frustration regarding their graduate experiences, and shared feelings of alienation and being singled out on numerous occasions. As they were one of a few minority students in their program, they frequently felt pressure during classroom discussions to be a spokesperson for all minority students. As a result of these experiences, the participants called for greater diversity representation in graduate preparation faculty and administration. While it may be challenging to fundamentally alter the diversity composition in a program (i.e., small number of faculty), the participants suggested several other strategies to increase the visibility and engagement of diversity in graduate programs. These suggestions included weaving diversity and inclusion development across the entire curriculum (not just one class), inviting diverse guest lecturers to address multicultural and diversity issues in the field, and visiting institutions that serve underrepresented and diverse student populations. This echoes Talbot’s (1996) earlier findings that student affairs graduate students who were enrolled in more diverse institutions had higher levels of comfort and knowledge with matters of diversity than those enrolled in more homogenous institutions. Based on Talbot’s (1996) and Flowers and Howard-Hamilton’s (2002) findings, diversity across the curriculum, and engagement with diverse audiences—in student populations served, program
faculty, and guest lecturers—would benefit all students, both minority and majority students, in becoming stronger professionals.

**Curricular and competency congruence.** A second major area of research in student affairs preparation relates to the competencies needed for success in the field and examinations regarding the extent to which preparation programs are engendering these skills unto new professionals. Preparing new professionals for entry into the field of student affairs has been an area of interest among student affairs preparation faculty, hiring managers and supervisors, and professional development organizations. Professional competencies for the field have been sourced from a variety of origins, including professional development organizations, historical documents, and research that has examined and evaluated what constitutes requisite professional competencies for successful practice in student affairs. These competencies have been developed, evaluated, and refined by professional development organizations since the publication of the Student Personnel Point of View in 1937 (Evan & Reason, 2001). Although consensus has not been reached concerning what constitutes optimal preparation for the field, there is general agreement concerning a core of common competencies, as well as strong agreement that preparation and ongoing professional development is essential to the success of the profession.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education is an organization that has developed and published a widely-adopted set of professional standards for higher education (Eaton, 2016). Since 1979, CAS (2018) has developed a robust portfolio of standards that apply to the general administration and management of higher education student affairs programs, and standards for 45 specific functional areas. CAS also provides guidance and
resources for institutions and functional areas to conduct self-assessment against these standards to evaluate congruence and areas for improvement.

Drawing from CAS, the two primary higher education student affairs professional development organizations, NASPA and ACPA, collaborated and developed a shared view on higher education student affairs professional competencies (*Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Professionals*, 2015). This initiative was established in 2009 to help develop consensus regarding competencies needed for successful practice in the field and to present a unified voice on this issue among the primary professional development organizations in higher education student affairs. The revised 2015 edition outlines 10 competencies, including several updates from the initial publication in 2009. The updates in the most recent version of this document center on the impact of technology in the field, as well as the growing diversity among student populations in higher education and the subsequent need for professionals to adopt a strong social justice lens to meet the needs of these changing demographics.

In addition to the establishment of core competencies, the requisite capabilities for the profession have been researched and evaluated from specific professional viewpoints, including new professionals (Mather, Smith, & Skipper, 2010; Waple, 2000; Waple, 2006), their supervisors (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Robertson, 1999), comparisons between mid-level managers and senior student affairs officers (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Herdleim, 2004), and graduate program faculty (Herdlein, Kline, Boquard, & Haddad, 2010; Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2008; Young & Janosik, 2007). This area of research has also been examined through a literature meta-analysis approach. In two studies, separated by 12 years, the common and salient traits, qualities, skills, and knowledge areas were identified across the spans
of higher education student affairs research (Herdlein, Reiefler, & Mrowka, 2013; Lovell & Kosten, 2000).

Through a review of current higher education literature, Waple (2006) identified 28 student affairs skills that were consistent across student affairs preparation program literature. From these common competencies, Waple developed an instrument to capture the reactions of 430 new professionals regarding their evaluation of these competencies. The respondents in this study were asked to indicate to what degree they attained the competency in their preparation program and to what degree the competency was necessary for them to perform their job. The respondents indicated that all but three of the 28 competencies were acquired in their master’s program at a moderate to high degree. The five highest ranked competencies acquired through their preparation programs were: understanding and applying student development theory, oral and written communication skills, ethics in student affairs, multicultural awareness and knowledge, and career development skills. The three lowest acquired competencies were: budget and fiscal management, strategic planning, and the use of computers in higher education. Similarly, all but three of the competencies were rated as necessary for their current job at a moderate or high level. The top five relevant competencies included: oral and written communication skills, problem-solving abilities, advising students and student organizations, crisis and conflict management, and effective program planning and implementation. The three competencies deemed least relevant in their work were research methods, history of higher education, and the history of student affairs. Overall, Waple (2006) found that the clear majority of the competencies examined were rated high both in terms of acquisition and need. Only four skill areas were classified as attained at a low degree in graduate preparation but needed at high
degree for successful practice. These include the use of computers in higher education, budget and fiscal management, strategic planning, and supervision of staff.

Competency acquisition and relevancy has also been examined from a comparative approach. Two studies looked at how new professionals rated acquisition and relevancy of competencies compared to how their supervisors rated these matters. Robertson (1999) examined the views of 100 recent graduates and their immediate supervisors. Both groups in the study perceived all 46 competencies presented as important to new professionals entering the profession. Per supervisors, the recent graduates in the study were considered competent in regards to all 46 competencies. Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Molina (2009) approached professional competencies from a similar perspective and surveyed 86 new professionals and supervisor pairs. The instrument used in this study was based on the competencies developed by CAS, and essentially posed the same research question: To what degree was a competency adequately acquired in a preparation program and to what degree was the competency essential for the work? Overall, new professionals rated their preparation programs as having prepared them for the CAS competencies, and that the competencies were needed for their work as new professionals. The same was true of the supervisors’ ratings for both the new employees’ preparation quality and the importance of the competencies for successful practice.

Mather, Smith, and Skipper (2010) also examined this issue, but with a slightly different focus. In addition to assessing the degree in which the skills were acquired and used, this study also addressed whether the skills were developed specifically in the classroom or developed in an out-of-the-class setting (e.g., practicum experience, assistantship, internship). This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining a survey with an open-ended questionnaire. The competencies used in this study were identified by the ACPA steering committee on
professional competencies. When comparing competency acquisition, there was a strong connection between what was learned outside of the classroom and what is commonly used as a new professional, and less congruence between what was learned in the classroom and what is used as a new professional. However, in the open-ended questions, respondents clearly identified their classroom learning as presenting significant value regarding their competency development. They viewed their classroom experiences as an essential foundation of knowledge needed to both acquire and use competencies in their work.

The matter of competencies needed for new professionals entering the field has also been examined among groups with higher levels of practice in the profession. Using a Delphi study, Burkard, et al. (2005) examined mid- and senior-level student affairs professionals regarding their view on what competencies are most important for professional practice. The main purpose of using this method was to develop a consensus among these two populations regarding the requisite skills and competencies needed for success as a new professional in the student affairs field. Three iterations of a questionnaire were completed by 104 participants. The results of the study produced a list of the typical entry-level positions in student affairs, the common responsibilities related to these positions, and the required competencies needed to be successful in these positions. The findings indicated that human relations, administrative and management skills, technology skills, research and assessment skills, as well as several personal attributes, such as flexibility, time management skills, and managing multiple tasks, are important for successful entry-level practice. Similarly, Herdlein (2004) examined requisite student affairs competencies for new professionals from the perspective of senior student affairs officers. The participants in this study provided opinions on what they believed to be the requisite learning outcomes new professionals need for entry into the field. In addition, study
participants provided their rating of their own staff in terms of these required learning outcomes. Overall, the 50 respondents indicated general satisfaction with the learning outcomes of graduates from student affairs preparation programs, and a favorable rating of their staff related to these learning outcomes.

Herdline et al. (2010) added another viewpoint on the inquiry of student affairs competencies by surveying faculty in student affairs preparation programs. Using a web-based instrument, 254 faculty were surveyed regarding their view on the CAS standards for higher education preparation programs, what courses they believed were most important in the preparation of new professionals, what themes should be most reinforced throughout the curriculum, and which skills they deemed most essential for students to learn before entering the profession. Overall, the faculty in this study agreed with the importance of the CAS standards and learning outcomes. The lowest rated areas were experiential learning, political issues in higher education, and supervision theory. The respondents indicated that student development theory was the highest priority course in their programs, and that the major themes that should be reinforced across their programs included ethical conduct and decision making, diversity and multicultural competencies, professionalism, and using student development theory in practice.

Kuk and Cobb (2007) sought to compare what competencies were rated most valuable by several professional segments including mid-level managers, senior student affairs officers, and student affairs preparation program faculty. These three professional segments were asked to rate 50 competencies across four major groups: individual practice and administration, professional knowledge and content, goal setting and the ability to deal with change, and managing organizations and people. The variance among the three constituencies in the study were examined across the four major groups of professional competencies. There was general
agreement between the mid-level managers and the senior student affair officers regarding their ratings. However, the faculty in the study significantly rated individual practice and administration and managing organizations and groups lower than those in the senior student affairs officer group. In addition, the faculty rated goal setting and the ability to deal with change significantly lower than both the mid-level managers and senior student affairs officers.

Finally, exploration of student affairs professional competencies has been examined through an in-depth review of research using a meta-analysis approach. In 2000, Lovell and Kosten examined 30 years of student affairs administration literature to determine which characteristics are necessary for success as a student affairs professional. The primary skills most frequently cited across higher education literature included administration and management, human facilitation, research, evaluation and assessment, and communication. Concerning knowledge areas, the most frequently found subjects included student development theory, functional unit responsibilities, academic background, and organizational development. Herdlein et al. (2013) examined the body of research regarding competencies that was published after Lovell and Kosten’s (2000) study (14 years of new data). Several of the top skills remained consistent. These included research, assessment and evaluation, communication, administration and management. In their research, new to the top skills areas was leadership. The top knowledge areas were considerably different. They included multicultural and diversity issues, student development theory, legal issues, research and assessment, and budget and finance.

Although sources may differ on what exact set of competencies are needed for new professionals to enter the field of student affairs, there seems to be general agreement regarding what core competencies are needed and that these are being developed in new professionals by graduate programs. This is especially true among the perspectives of new professionals and their
supervisors. In the case of my research, how new professionals evaluate their start in the field and how they consider and potentially evaluate the competencies they acquired in their preparation programs related to the demands of their roles will likely be considered. It will be important to present the findings from my research in the context of what is already known regarding competency acquisition and the value and relevancy of these competencies in field of student affairs.

**Socialization of new student affairs professionals.** My research seeks to examine the lived experiences of new student affairs professionals. At the core of this research will be an account of their socialization experiences. This includes their experiences across their graduate programs and as they transition into their first professional role. One way to codify and frame these experiences is through the lens of socialization. Hirschy, Wilson, Liddell, Boyle, and Pasquesi (2015) define socialization in higher education as the social interactions, primarily between novice and seasoned professionals, through which a novice professional begins to learn and adopt the norms, values, language, and attitudes needed for success in the student affairs profession. In addition, this is the process by which new professionals gain a sense of belonging and affiliation in the student affairs profession.

The examination of socialization of new professionals into their first role represents another significant area of research related to student affairs training and development. As such, this body of research holds special relevance and context regarding the aim of my research. Studies in this area have examined the transition experience between graduate school and a first job (Renn & Hodges, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), the job search and hiring process (Banas, 2010; Lombardi 2013), new professionals’ professional development needs and preferences (Cliente et al., 2006; Janosik et al., 2006), attrition factors among new professionals
(Buchanan, 2012), and the overall socialization experiences of new professionals (Hirschy, Boyle, Wilson, Pasquesi, & Liddell, 2015; Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, & Boyle, 2014; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

Inquiries into the experience of new professionals seem to hinge on one major common concern, the attrition of new professionals (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Buchanan (2012) observed that the majority of previous studies in this area have shown that student affairs professionals report relatively low levels of commitment and depart from the field at rates between 32% and 61% (depending on the year and study). Among segments of student affairs professionals, new professionals have been found to have the highest rates of departure. Through interviews with five former new student affairs professionals, Buchanan (2012) found several emergent themes shared among all participants related to their departure from the student affairs field. These include a lack of active mentorship, long hours and burnout, low pay, and limited career advancement opportunities. These findings resonate with the outcomes of Renn and Hodges’s (2007) yearlong longitudinal study of ten new student affairs professionals and their first year on the job. They engaged new professionals over three phases of their first professional year (pre-employment and orientation, transition, and settled in) and found three major themes that were considered central among the participants’ having positive transition experiences. These included the formation of positive relationships with supervisors and mentors, the fit new professionals felt in their institution and their specific role, and that the new professionals felt competent, were able to readily accomplish their initial duties, and had professional development and direction when needed.

Positive relationships between new professionals and their immediate supervisors were central to new professionals’ success in both Buchanan (2012) and Renn and Hodge’s (2007)
studies. This factor was also central in the findings of Cliente’s et al. (2006) inquiry into the professional development needs of new professionals. This study combined data acquired through a survey instrument from 269 new professionals, and focus group data from both new professionals and senior student affairs professionals. The highest rated survey item by new professionals was receiving adequate support from supervisors, mentors, and colleagues. Other top level needs included understanding job expectations, being able to foster student learning, understanding how to move up in the field, improving supervision skills, and developing and improving multicultural competencies. Findings from the focus groups revealed that new professionals perceived navigating institutional culture, and aligning their professional and personal values with those of the institution as central challenges, and of significant importance for their success.

To understand the new professional experience from a more in-depth perspective, Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) conducted the National Study of New Professionals in Student Affairs. This yearlong study of 90 new professionals examined their transition and socialization experiences throughout their first year on the job. Using a grounded theory approach, the feedback of the new professionals was collected at ten intervals over the course of a full year via an online questionnaire. The results revealed themes consistent with other research in this area. The study participants identified four central challenges regarding their transition into their first professional position, which included creating a professional identity, navigating institutional culture, maintaining a learning orientation, and seeking sage advice. As a result of these findings, Renn and Jessup-Anger suggest that preparation programs help new graduates navigate these challenges by providing more deliberate transitional experiences that connect theoretical learning of student affairs to the actual practice. In addition, they recommend equipping
transitioning professionals with skills to both read and navigate new institutional systems and cultures, and engender a lifelong learning orientation among graduates so that they may take personal responsibility to pursue professional growth and development throughout their career. Finally, they suggest that new professionals need to more effectively use their supervisors and mentors to improve their own transition into the workplace and support their success as novices in the field.

In the studies reviewed surrounding new student affairs professional experiences, new professionals cited relationships with their supervisors as central to their successful transition (Cliente et al., 2006; Buchanan, 2012; Renn & Hodges, 2007). In these studies, this matter had been addressed from the onus of supervisors and mentors to improve the socialization and transition of new professionals. However, Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) suggest that higher education programs should help graduates learn how to best engage with their new supervisors and mentors so that they can maximize these relationships, cultivate open and honest communication, and make the most of these relationships to support their own success. Lombardi (2013) reinforces this recommendation through the examination of the socialization experiences of new student affairs professionals. The participants in this grounded theory study related that more proactive socialization actions taken on behalf of the new professionals (e.g., talking with mentors and peers about the professional transition process, seeking preparation advice from new supervisors, actively participating in institutional onboarding and orientation systems) correlated with positive transition experiences and strong initial relations with new supervisors and colleagues.

Concerning the socialization of new student affairs professionals, Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, and Boyle (2014) examined the relationship between experiences in graduate
program and professional identity development. Through a survey of 178 new student affairs professionals, Liddle et al. (2014) found that there was high congruence between participants’ graduate functional areas and the functional areas of their first professional roles. More than three quarters of the respondents’ first position was in the area of their graduate assistantship. In addition, the responses in this study indicate that out-of-class experiences, in particular graduate assistantships, had a high correlation to students’ being able to navigate institutional culture and politics, develop and expand professional networks, and manage professional expectations as new professionals. Other program experiences and qualities such as study abroad opportunities, high levels of peer collaboration, and use of common professional and ethical standards in graduate programs were correlated with higher levels of new professionals’ professional identity factors including commitment levels, values congruence, and intellectual investment in their institutions of work. The authors of this study found that these graduate program experiences related to higher levels of professional identity indicators, and that out of class experiences had the strongest relationship correlation. In another study, Hirschy, Boyle, Wilson, Pasquesi, and Liddell (2015) found similar outcomes. Unique to this study, they also examined if demographic attributes had any relationship among new professionals and their professional identity development. They found that older students had higher levels of values congruence scores, suggesting that this student population had more time to explore, define, and clarify their professional values. Other demographic variables showed no relationship with professional identify development factors.

Finally, as noted in Chapter I, I am using the Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Graduate Socialization Framework to examine the findings in my study. Utilizing a socialization framework specific to graduate student socialization will provide a structure to categorize data
collected from my research into a cogent arrangement for review and analysis. In addition, this framework will allow the data and potential findings to be clarified and explained through a known model in existing literature and provide context in relation to associated research.

The Weidman, Twale, and Stein Framework (2001) builds on earlier models of graduate student socialization. Graduate student socialization frameworks have evolved over time, having first characterized the experiences of socialization as a linear process where students move sequentially through their graduate programs into their professional roles (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Gradually, these models have become more complex and sophisticated, and depict a fuller view of the inputs, experiences, stages, and the interconnectedness of various processes, structures, and systems that play a role in graduate student socialization.

Although the linear model accurately represents a student moving from a specific program of study into their first professional role, it does not account for the many other experiences prior to enrollment in a graduate program, less formal experiences that occur in the program, and experiences that occur outside of or after the program completion that affect socialization (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Ways to describe and characterize graduate student socialization have since developed into more complex understandings. For example, Baird (as cited in Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001) developed a concept through which he examined the interconnectedness between graduate students, their relations with faculty, and an emphasis on experiences (such as internships and assistantships) that informed both the socialization of graduate students as well as the development and advancement of the graduate program. This model is represented by a cycle of continued progression, feedback, and reflection for the students and graduate program. Baird’s model was based on a survey of 596 doctoral students, through which the main findings revealed that the more successful graduate
students had higher levels of engagement with their faculty, their peers, and their studies and research. Baird concluded that the more engaged graduate students were with a community of faculty, other learners, and their research, the stronger they performed in their program.

Kochan, Reed, Twale, and Jones (1999) build on the cyclical approach to graduate student socialization by introducing a more complex view that illustrates the relationship between graduate program experiences and the greater professional community, and how these communities inform both graduate preparation and how graduate programs can inform standards of professional practice. Kochan et al. (1999) observed the redesign of a graduate education leadership development program over the course of four years. This redesign emphasized a systems approach to the learning process and the development of a community of learners. At the conclusion of the redesign, the faculty and program staff were asked to develop a conceptual framework to describe the new program. The resulting circular framework emphasized the relationship and connectedness among graduate students and faculty as a community of learners, as well as their engagement with the professional community they sought to join upon completion of their program.

As cited by Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001), other nonlinear and interactive frameworks describing graduate student socialization include the Bragg Framework (1976), the Stark, Lowther, Hagerty, and Orczyk Framework (1986), and the Stein and Weidman Graduate Socialization Framework (1990). Bragg (1976) introduced the concept that institutional characteristics define distinct learning environments, which contribute to a student’s development of a professional identity. According to Bragg, the faculty, institutional environment, and community of students form a unique learning community that has a significant bearing on a graduate student’s socialization experience and the development of their
professional identity. Bragg asserted that the graduate program curricula imparts the knowledge and skills needed to perform in a profession. However, it is of equal importance to understand the impact of interactions between the graduate student and their specific learning community (e.g., the campus, the history, traditions, culture) on the development of attitudes, values, and habits that also significantly shape a student’s professional identity.

Stark et al. (1986) employed a grounded theory approach to develop their framework through the combination of a literature review, the examination of data from previous graduate program studies, program descriptions from various colleges and universities, and interviews with faculty across various graduate programs. Their framework, a Framework for Describing Professional Preparation Programs (Stark et al., 1986), is an interactive and dynamic description of socialization experiences. This framework focuses on the the relationship between external influences, internal influences, and intraorganizational influences in the professional preparation environment. External influences describe the impact that the profession has on the preparation program environment, such as licensure requirements, changes in professional standards, and media representation of the field. Internal influences are specific to the faculty in the program and describe how they may approach research or the specialization of focus they employ in their curricula. The final factor, intraorganizational influence, describes the relationship of the academic program with its institution. Intraorganizational influences include the program’s budget, place in a specific academic department or school (i.e., organizational structure), and institutional policies. The primary direction of this model is linear. It describes socialization as the relationship between various influences (internal, external, and intraorganizational) on the academic learning environment, which then informs and shapes the educational processes used to train students and engender professional capabilities, skills, behaviors, and values. It is
important to note, however, that Stark et al. (1986) also describe a feedback loop, in which the educational preparation environment and graduates from these programs shape and influence the broader profession.

The Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) framework represents a complex and full view of graduate student socialization, and incorporates and builds on frameworks developed prior. This framework places the graduate experience at the center of the socialization process. This essential experience includes the institutional culture of the university, the formal socialization processes embedded in the program of study, and the core elements of socialization (knowledge acquisition, investment, and involvement). In addition, this framework accounts for the background and predispositions held by the student prior to enrollment, the personal and professional communities in which the student holds membership in, and the emergence of their professional identity as they begin their career. This model illustrates that these experiences have an impact on a student’s socialization outside of the prescribed experience in the program of study. These attributes also demonstrate that the experience of socialization is both communal and independent. Students who go through the same graduate program encounter a very similar socialization experience as their peers via their program of study, as well as a more unique and individual experience as a result of their background, various personal communities, and professional affiliations that also impact their professional socialization.

Also represented in this model are Thorton and Nardi’s four interactive stages of socialization (as cited in Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001) that occur both across and among all elements of the socialization experience. These stages include anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. The anticipatory stage describes when a student develops an awareness of the behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge requirements held by successful incumbents in their
intended career field. In this stage, many of the ideas held about the professional that students hope to attain are based largely on stereotypes, perceptions, and portrayals in mass media, and not actual experiences or grounded findings from literature, research, and reports from the field. While in the formal stage, when students are actively participating in coursework and practicum experiences, they engage in prescribed training and educational experiences that translate the competencies, behaviors, knowledge, acquisition, and skills required for successful professional status in the field. During courses, practicum experiences, and assistantships, students interact with professional incumbents and peers who are further along in the program and begin to move from an idealized understanding of the profession to adopt a stronger and more clear understanding of the normative expectations in the field. In the informal stage, the third stage, predominantly via less formal and more social engagements with faculty, incumbent professionals, and peers, students develop a more in-depth awareness regarding behaviors, cues, and norms regarding the profession. They personally identify themselves moving from a student status into that of a professional. Finally, students experience the personal stage of socialization. In this stage students also begin to differentiate and specify their professional identity through their pursuits in research, specialization, and becoming more involved in professional organizations and engagements such as scholarship activities, conference presentations, and service in professional development organizations.

The Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Graduate Student Framework is the culmination and synthesis of previous frameworks and models that provide an understanding of the socialization experiences of new professional who have completed a related graduate program. This model has been selected to provide a lens for my research. The Weidman, Twale, and Stein Graduate Student Framework is a dynamic, interactive, and collaborative model, which considers
inputs, output, and a myriad of influences that impact the readiness of graduate students as they set forth into their career and develop their initial professional identities. I chose this framework as it seems to be inclusive of previous models and provides a holistic and comprehensive view of graduate student socialization.

Overall, the socialization of new professionals has been moderately studied. In addition to the empirical studies listed here, two publications, *Beginning Your Journey* (Amey & Reesor, 2009) and *Job One 2.0* (Magolda & Carnaghi, 2014), provide narrative-rich and contextual accounts of the new student affairs professional socialization experiences. Yet, aside from the Cliente’s et al. (2006) study of new professionals’ perceived needs for professional development, and Renn and Hodges (2007) and Renn & Jessup-Anger’s (2008) inquiries into the first year of new professionals, the viewpoints of new professionals on their transition into the workplace, and their preparation for that transition, have largely gone unheard in the empirical literature. An even more glaring omission from the body of literature, as presented in the purpose and problem statement for my study, is the experience of those who transition as new professionals in the community college is largely absent from the body of research.

**Student Affairs Professionals in the Community College**

In terms of studies that specifically examine the professional experiences of student affairs in the community college setting, the body of research is limited. Only a few studies were found that addressed these matters in higher education literature, especially related to new professionals in this setting. Yet there are inquiries that explore and define the attributes specific to the community college. This segment of literature illustrates that the community college is a unique and distinct higher education environment and provides insight into the primary missions of this institution, the students and constituencies served, and other factors that relate to the
working environment experienced by student affairs professionals. Whereas new professional experiences are scarcely represented in the literature, there are studies into the experiences of community college senior student affairs officers. In addition, there is a strong collection of best practices regarding the administration of student affairs (sometimes referred to as student services) programs in the community college. Although these writings have value, it is important to note that this body of writing is not empirical in nature.

In addition to exploring what is known regarding the community college student affairs experience, what distinguishes the community college as a distinct higher education institutional type will be explored as well. The following section will also examine the characteristics of the public community college to better understand some of the elements that may shape the student affairs work experienced in this environment.

**Missions and Attributes of the Community College**

In her examination of the relationship between educational environment and the work experience of student affair professionals, Hirt (2006) concludes that institutional mission is a primary factor that differentiates one institutional type from another and, subsequently, the corresponding student affairs professional work experience. Although there are variances across the more than 1,100 community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018) in terms of mission and characteristics, there are several attributes that are nearly universal and express the core missions of this higher education institutional type. These attributes include serving a defined geographic region while providing pathways for workforce oriented credentials, credit and associate’s degrees for transfer toward baccalaureate degree attainment, and developmental coursework to help students gain the skills to perform in college-level programs (Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker, 2014). An open access admission policy is another
defining attribute of the community college. Historically, and unlike selective admission policy institutions, the community college has opened its doors to nearly any student regardless of age, race, socioeconomic status, or previous academic readiness, so that they may gain access to higher education and pursue a postsecondary credential (Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013).

Beginning in 1910, with the founding of Joliet Junior College in Illinois (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016), the community college began with the primary function to allow students to complete up to two years of college-level course work and then transfer to a four-year institution to finish a baccalaureate degree. During the late nineteenth century, colleges and universities played key roles in establishing community colleges in their regions, which generated direct pipelines of students to their institutions (Cohen et al., 2014). This function served as a primary pathway for students to start college in their immediate community and then transfer to a regional college or university. This remains a core component of the community college mission. In 2012, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement found that 78% of community college students intended to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree. A good portion of these students do go onto attain their bachelor’s degree. Mullin (2012) found that 28% of all bachelor’s degree recipients began as community college students.

In addition to transfer programs, the community college provides coursework and training that leads directly to employment or occupational advancement opportunities. These training programs may result in the completion of a professional certificate or an applied associates degree (Cohen et al., 2014). However, some programs do not offer college credit but are specifically developed and tailored at the request of a regional business or industry group. During the 2012 academic year, community colleges awarded 436,037 professional certificates.
and applied associate degrees (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). This core function of the community college has a considerable impact on the economic development and vitality of the service regions connected to these institutions, and community colleges are seen as central engines in the development of regional talent pipelines and workforce development (Myran & Ivery, 2013; Nickoli, 2013).

Another central mission of the community college has been its open access admission policies, which have allowed higher concentrations of under-represented student segments to enter higher education through the community college compared to four-year institutions (Boggs, 2012). For students who did not do well in high school, the community college offers forgiveness of previous academic performance and an opportunity to start over. Non-selective admission policies have also provided a common passage for many non-traditional aged students into college, as well as minority student populations that have been historically and disproportionately underrepresented in higher education (Sullivan & Nielsen, 2013). In addition to non-selective admission policies, affordability is another important attribute of the community college’s ability to provide greater access to higher education. The American Association of Community Colleges (“Fast Facts”, 2018) reports that the national average community college tuition and fee costs are 64% less than that at four-year institutions. The Institute for College Access & Success (2016) found that 40% of community college students did not have the means to fund the costs for a four-year college experience. Although some of these students may have had the academic readiness to attend a selective admissions institution, they may have not had the financial means to attend. The community college provides an affordable entry point into higher education for these students as well.
Although open-door admission policies have done much to increase overall access to higher education, these policies have also placed the community college in a position of providing academic coursework, resources, and support for many students who are not academically prepared for college. Despite completing high school and earning a diploma, many students are still not ready for college-level work. Based on college readiness assessments, community college students are frequently placed into developmental coursework in which they take classes that focus on acquiring the knowledge and skills required to enter and complete college level courses. Subsequently, offering developmental coursework has become another central mission of the community college. Sparks & Malkus (2013) reported that one out of three community college students required placement in at least one developmental course. It should also be noted that the need for developmental education is not happening only in the community college. The NCES (Sparks & Malkus, 2013) also reported that one out of five students across public four-year institutions required at least one development course completion during their first year in college.

The resources required to improve developmental students’ academic readiness are significant. Calculations regarding the costs of these programs range between $1.9 to 2.3 billion annually (Bailey, 2008). Despite great effort and considerable resources to address student readiness, there are concerns that developmental education has done little to improve student persistence and graduation rates. Bailey (2008) indicates that one of the main reasons that this student segment does not do well is the fact that many of these students do not complete the required sequence of developmental courses, and drop out of higher education before they even enter college level courses. There is also growing concern that students who are required to take several developmental education courses could deplete a significant portion of their financial aid
eligibility prior to entering into college-level courses, and they may reduce future funding needed to complete their intended program (Fernandez, Barone, & Klepfer, 2014).

Yet there are some bright spots in the efforts to improve academic success of developmental students. Some research in this area shows that developmental education does help underprepared students find success and improve their academic standing (Smith, 2016). The Complete College America (2016) initiative has found that traditional methods, for which institutions enforce prerequisite developmental course placements prior to college level course entry, does not work. Their research shows that co-requisite developmental placement helps expedite student completion of developmental course requirements and increases students’ persistence and completion rates. Instead of taking developmental courses prior to entry into college-level courses, the co-requisite approach has students enroll in both the developmental course and related gateway course at the same time. In three states in which this method has been initiated, student completion rates for gateway course completion with a co-requisite is above 60%. Whereas the national completion rate for gateway courses is only 20% when students are required to complete a prerequisite developmental course first (Complete College America, 2016). These are promising recent findings that could move the future of this community college core function toward higher levels of success.

Community College Students

Aside from the various missions that establish the community college as a distinct higher education institution, the composition of the students served is another defining characteristic. When considering the composition of community college students, Cohen et al. (2014) note that there are two primary words that best describe this population: “number and variety” (p. 45). Since 1960, community college enrollments have climbed from just over 500,000 to over 7.5
million in 2014 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). This enrollment represents nearly half of all students enrolled in higher education in the United States. It is important to also note that these student figures only account for degree seeking students. When taking into account students who access the community college for non-credit job training programs, another five million students are enrolled in these institutions annually. A combined total of over 12 million students are served by the community college each year. This figure exceeds those enrolled in four-year colleges and universities on an annual basis.

In addition to the large number of students served, the community college enrolls a higher proportion of racially diverse students compared to four-year institutions (save those that serve specific minority student populations, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), the racial composition of students attending four-year colleges and universities was 63.7% White and 36.3% students of color (Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian, or two or more races). Whereas the racial composition of students in two-year public institutions was 54.3% White and 45.7% students of color. In a different analysis of these trends, *Bridging the higher education divide* (Century Foundation, 2013) reported that White student representation in the community college population fell from 73% to 58% between 1994 and 2006. Providing access to higher education has been a critical and central mission of the community college since its inception. The community college has consistently enrolled at higher proportions than most other higher education institutions populations of students that have been generally underrepresented and underserved in higher education (Boggs, 2012; Cohen et al., 2014).

In addition to race, the representation of other aspects of diversity among community college students is significant. For instance, the national average age of a student attending a
community college is 28 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). According to
the National Center for Education Statistics (Sparks & Malkus, 2013), 47.3% of community
college students are 21 years old or younger. On the other hand, 60.8% of students in public four
year institutions and 63.4% of students in private four-year institutions are 21 years old or
younger. Likely the result of proximity, affordability, and flexibility in class offerings and
modalities, the community college appeals to non-traditional age students who balance work and
family while they work toward their program completion. This higher representation of non-
traditional age students is present in both the proportion of students who attend community
college on a part-time basis and those who work full- or near full-time hours while attending. In
2013, the number of community college students attending at a part-time rate was 63%
(American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Of the part-time attendees, 73% were
working at least 20 hours per week, and 41% worked full time in addition to their studies
(American Association of Community Colleges, 2016).

In addition to the biodemographic attributes of those who enroll in a community college,
the patterns of student enrollments in the community college have been examined and deemed
unique to this intuition type as well. They are frequently described as transient, fluid, and
difficult to track and report. Community college enrollments can be impacted by many factors,
including students who stop out for a period to focus on family obligations, changes in full and
part-time status to accommodate work requirements, or patterns of swirling enrollments, where
students transfer between multiple institutions over the course of their program completion
(Sturtz, 2006). These and other factors make tracking community college students’ enrollments
extremely challenging. The unique patterns of enrollment found in the community college have
even been characterized as chaotic (Crosta, 2014). Crosta (2013) examined the intensity (part-
time versus full-time) and consistency of enrollment for over 14,000 students among five community colleges in a six year period. The outcome of this study indicated that there are very few common patterns of enrollment among community college students, and that the greater occurrence of full-time status and continuous enrollment was correlated to higher levels of completion and transfer. Unfortunately, higher levels of enrollment intensity and consistency were not the norm found in this study.

Amid scrutiny and concern from oversight and funding bodies, tracking and demonstrating community college student persistence and success has been a challenge. Some institutions have taken special effort to document and track students who enroll without an interest to complete a specific program nor with an intent to transfer. As an example, the California Community College Chancellor’s Office developed the Skills Builders program to track these unique student enrollments and their outcomes (Smith, 2016). From the cohort enrolled in 2012-13, they reported that 86,000 students enrolled at California community colleges with the intent to expand their skill and knowledge base without completing a program or earning a degree. Although these students did not complete a degree, it was found that they earned an annual median wage increase of $4,300 (an average increase of 13.6%) as a result of their course completions. Statewide, these earning gains totaled $498 million in one year. These findings illustrate how community colleges improve the lives of students and their regional economies through non-traditional patterns of enrollment.

As these scenarios and variations in enrollment patterns suggest, as well as the various characteristics and attributes of students who enroll, the community college is an institution that serves vast and diverse audiences and expands the notion of who has been traditionally considered a college student. Student affairs professionals who work in this environment should
be aware of the complexities regarding the student segments who enroll in these institutions, as well as the multiple and complex missions that serve the region surrounding the community college.

**Social and Political Forces on the Community College**

In addition to the vast number and types of students served and missions performed, there are other characteristics and attributes that distinguish the community college as a unique higher education institution. There have been considerable social and political forces that have impacted higher education in the last ten years, such as the economic recession of 2007 and the growing political and social concern about the rising costs of higher education. These factors have been experienced by both community colleges and other higher education institutions. Yet many of these forces have had varying and different outcomes for the community college, the students and communities they serve, and on the faculty and staff who work in this institutional type.

A dynamic that has recently emerged with greater intensity regarding the community college is its connection to economic and workforce needs. The community college has recently been called upon to play a primary role in our nation’s response to rapidly changing economic and workforce trends. By 2020, it is projected that 65% of all jobs will require a credential beyond high school, and that the United States will have a deficit of over 11 million positions that require workers with postsecondary credentials (Griego, 2015). In response, then President Barack Obama (The White House, 2009) identified the community college as a key engine to reestablish the United States as the global leader in the category of citizens that have attained higher education credentials. Once the leader in higher education degree attainment among industrialized nations, the United States has slipped to 10th on this list (Bradley, 2010). In 2009,
President Obama set the goal of adding five million new students with degrees by 2020, and the community college was named as the primary institution needed to reach this goal. Six years later, in his State of the Union address, he outlined a vision to provide free community college for all students in the United States (The White House, 2015). According to the former administration, the community college has a significant role to play in the education, training, and preparation of our nation’s workforce. This is a role that the community college is accustomed to serving. Currently, the community college prepares more than 80% of the nation’s registered nurses and a considerable majority of other healthcare workers, over 80% of first responders such as paramedics, firefighters, and police officers, and a growing number of those in the advanced manufacturing and technology fields (Boggs, 2012). As the leadership in the executive branch of the federal government has recently changed, the role of the community college in the new administration is uncertain at this time.

Although the community college has been elevated as an important organization to improve the educational and economic challenges in our country, there have been many challenges related to the resources needed to fully realize these goals. Many of these challenges relate to the recession of 2007. Like other segments of our society, this recession had a significant impact on higher education. In particular, the community college felt substantial negative outcomes from this financial crash. Prior to the recession, state funding represented a considerable portion of community college revenues. As state tax revenues decreased as a result of the 2007 recession, appropriations for higher education were cut significantly. As an example, just after the crash of the housing market and the start of the recession, Katsinas, Tollefson, and Reamey (2008) reported that 17 states did not fully fund their community colleges based on original funding formulas that had been approved for that year. In addition to the loss
of revenues appropriated by state governments, many community colleges also rely on another source of revenue that has experienced a sharp decline since the recession. This other source is taxes collected on local housing values. Obviously, this revenue source decreased significantly as a result of the housing market collapse that led to the 2007 recession. During and after the recession, property values and the taxes collected on these properties fell sharply due to the housing value decline (Miller, 2013). This placed considerable hardship on community colleges, as two out of three primary revenue sources declined rapidly and significantly.

Compounding these issues, the community college also observed record breaking enrollment during this time frame (The Pew Research Center, 2009). In 2009, the Pew Research Center reported that college attendance had reached an all-time high, and this spike in enrollment was primarily the result of increased enrollment in the community college. This trend had been observed before. Enrollment trends at the community college have had a counter-cyclical relationship with the economy over the course of time (Chen, 2015). This trend has shown that economic declines drive increases in community college enrollment, and when the economy improves community college enrollment subsequently declines. During the recession, this created the challenge that community colleges needed to serve a substantially larger number of students with significantly reduced financial resources. In some cases, community colleges turned away students because they could not afford the expenses that came with increased enrollment and decreasing revenues. In California, the state community college system turned away 140,000 students due to this dynamic in 2010 (Fain, 2011). Although enrollment has declined and receded from an all-time high during the recession (mostly due to an improved economy), the trends in funding have remained relatively at the same level since 2007. A recent
report showed that state funding for higher education, on average, had declined by 21% between 2008 and 2014 (Young Invincibles, 2016).

Amidst declining funding and public support, this time frame was also marked by significant increases in tuition rates among most higher education institutions. The community college, even more so than other higher education institutional types, struggled with increasing tuition to offset the other declining revenue sources. This is likely the result of most community colleges viewing affordability as a central tenet contributing to their open-door policies (Nutting, 2014). The main concern is that increased tuition and fees could reduce student access by imposing greater financial barriers and potentially limiting or cutting off access for those in the lowest socioeconomic levels, thus compromising the community college’s standing as an open-door institution. Community colleges are sensitive to raising tuition in ways that could price students out of attendance, especially those who rely most heavily on need-based financial aid.

There have been high levels of criticism targeted at higher education over escalating tuition and fee costs. However, the community college has only enacted modest increases in tuition and fees during this time. National community college tuition costs rose only 2.4% between 2001 and 2010 (Baum, Little & Payea, 2011). Whereas, four-year public institution tuition increased 5.6% during this same time period. It is important to note that a 2.4% increase on already low tuition rates at the community college has a lower impact on overall costs compared to a 5.6% increase on much higher four-year tuition rates.

To understand the professional experiences of those who work in the community college, it is important to initiate this research process by examining the characteristics and attributes that define this specific institutional type. The community college serves a wide range of students while also delivering a broad array of missions and programs and is an institution that is strongly
affected by its immediate regional economic and political conditions, as well those at the state and federal levels. The multifaceted and complex structures of this institution create both significant challenges and rewards for those who work in this environment. Faculty and staff who work in this institution face a fast-paced environment in which resources are likely limited. Yet expectations remain high to help those with the greatest academic needs gain both access and success in post-secondary education.

**The Student Affairs Experience in the Community College**

Overall, research concerning student affairs in the community college is sparse, and research related to *new* community college student affairs professionals is nearly absent. In general, the community college remains less visible in the body of mainstream higher education research compared to research regarding four-year institutions (Latz & Royer, 2014; Royer, Mulvihill, & Latz, 2016). These matters are illustrated by Townsend, Donaldson, and Wilson (2005), who conducted an analysis of five peer-reviewed higher education academic journals between 1990 and 2003. Of the 2,321 articles reviewed, only 49 (2%) referenced the community college in the title or main subject, and 187 (8%) referenced the community college in the title, subject, or had a significant position related to the community college in the body of the article.

Despite limited representation in the literature, the following sections will present and examine what information is available regarding the professional experience of those who work in community college student affairs. While there is little empirical documentation regarding the experiences specific to new student affairs professionals in the community college, research on new student affairs professionals in other institutional types can be readily found. As this study seeks to understand the experience of new student affairs professionals in the community
college, there are likely many shared experiences and perspectives regardless of the work setting and environment.

Specific to the community college, some studies were found that shed light, in particular, on the experiences of senior student affairs officers. Although not empirical research studies, there is also an appreciable amount of publications regarding best practices in the administration of student affairs and student services programs in the community college.

However, one empirical study was found that directly related to the purpose of this research. This study was a mixed-method review of the socialization experiences of mid-level and senior student affairs administrators in a community college (Hornak, Ozaki, & Lunceford, 2016). In addition, one study, in particular, has provided specific and unique insight into the student affairs professional experience by institutional type. In Where You Work Matters (2006), Hirt examined the experiences of student affairs professionals who worked in liberal arts colleges, religiously affiliated institutions, comprehensive colleges and universities, research universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic serving institutions, as well as community colleges. This research presents some of the most detailed perspectives into the specific experience of community college student affairs professionals available.

**Where you work matters.** As a distinctly regional institution, the community college offers a considerable array of curricular and service missions (transfer, workforce training, developmental education, and community service), serves a more diverse group of students than any other institutional type, and remains consistently responsive to the ongoing and emerging needs of its service region (Cohen et al., 2014). As such, the work environment in the community college is constantly moving and evolving, and those who work in student affairs in
this institutional type are pressed to work at a fast pace and be exacting in the delivery of success outcomes (Helfgot, 2005).

In her book *Where You Work Matters*, Hirt (2006) provides an in-depth look into the experiences of community college student affairs professionals not found elsewhere in the body of higher education literature. This research is a collection of student affairs professional experiences across seven different institutional types, including the community college. The overarching finding from *Where You Work Matters* is that the institutional type at which student affairs professionals work has a significant bearing on their work experience. Therefore, we can conclude that new student affairs professionals who enter the community college will have an experience that is distinct from those that work in other institutional types.

Hirt (2006) used quantitative data from two national surveys that examined community college student affairs professionals’ perceptions regarding the nature of their work, relationships, and reward systems. Their responses were statistically analyzed against those from other institutional types. In addition, community college student affairs professionals were invited to participate in the qualitative portion of this study. This included several case studies and follow-up interviews.

A key discovery from Hirt’s (2006) study was that community college student affairs professionals felt marginalized in the system of higher education. A quote from a participant illustrates this shared feeling:

Well, I think that we’re the poor stepchild of education. Kind of the - almost a continuation of high school in many peoples’ minds. We’re not the real deal. I think that the role that the community college plays is terribly underestimated and the kind of impact it has is terribly underestimated. (p. 145)
Another central finding that emerged from Hirt’s (2006) study showed that community college student affairs professionals, more so than those from any other institutional type, had a keen and strong awareness of and alignment with their institution’s missions. This centered on serving underrepresented populations that may not have otherwise been able to gain access to higher education, as well as supporting the functions of transfer, vocational, continuing, and developmental education. The other findings from Hirt’s (2006) research were grouped into two major areas. These groups included the work environment (focus of work, relationships with faculty, and levels of bureaucracy) and how the work was experienced (pace, how work is accomplished, and systems of rewards and recognition).

Concerning the work environment, community college professionals related three main themes (Hirt, 2006). These included that student service is the primary directive, relationships with faculty colleagues are positive and collaborative, and there are high levels of bureaucracy in their institutions. Although student affairs professionals across all institutional types spoke of serving students as their top priority, community college professionals spoke about this student engagement with greater specificity, intensity, and focus. For example, where their colleagues in other institutional types discussed helping students “find their purpose,” community college student affairs professionals spoke distinctly about helping students succeed in both college and life and that there was a greater immediacy concerning this success. Community college student affairs professionals recognize that their students work many hours in addition to going to school than any other college going population (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2012), and they view the lines between work and school as more closely intertwined. Thus, community college student affairs professionals frequently support and advise students on both school and work, so they may progress and find success on all fronts. In addition, community
college professionals frequently assist students as they transition into their existing careers, as their reason to attend a community college may be to gain a specific and short-term credential to have an immediate impact on their current work situation (Hirt, 2006).

The second major theme reported by community college student affairs professionals regarding their work environment was high levels of collaboration and collegiality with their faculty colleagues. Hirt (2006) found that student affairs professionals working in the community college, more so than professionals from other institutional types, related that they had strong and collaborative relationships with their faculty peers. Participants related that their faculty colleagues saw them as “educators in concert with them” (p. 148). The need for this collaboration may be highly pragmatic in nature. Ozaki and Hornak (2014) suggest that community college faculty and student affairs collaboration is essential to ensure the successful delivery of support services directly connected to the classroom experience, as out-of-class engagements are far more challenging to develop among populations that are very heterogeneous and when all, or the vast majority, are commuters.

The final theme related to work environment was the presence of high levels of bureaucracy. Hirt (2006) found that community college professionals reported the highest levels of institutional bureaucracy compared to other professional segments participating in her study. This theme illustrates a factor that contributes to a high workload and requires those working in the community college to have extreme precision and accuracy in their work. Community college professionals reported that they felt that, although this high level of bureaucracy lessened their sense of authority in their role, it did not impede their ability to be responsive to changing and evolving student needs.
In addition to the three primary themes regarding the work environment, Hirt (2006) also found that community college student affairs professionals experienced distinctions in the pace of their work, how their work is routinely accomplished, and the nature of their professional relationship and reward structures. Hirt (2006) characterized the pace of community college student affairs professionals’ work as “frenzied” (p. 149). This pace was attributed to the need for community colleges to quickly respond to external pressures from their service region through their major curricular and service functions. Unlike other student affairs professional segments in this study (e.g., comprehensive institutions, liberal arts colleges) who bemoaned how long it took their institutions to implement change efforts, many of the community college participants discussed needing to implement significant change efforts in the matter of weeks. Subsequently, Hirt (2006) characterized community college student affairs professionals as “producers” (p. 136). She came to this conclusion based on the fast-paced work environment and high workloads found in the community college.

Regarding how community college student affairs professionals accomplish their work, Hirt (2006) found that they employed conformity over creativity. She believes that this approach serves as a counterbalance to the rapid pace of responding to external requirements for change, as well as the need to serve such a broad audience of students and stakeholders while delivering multiple curricular and service missions. Despite these challenges, above all else, they value the relationships they form with their students as most important. Like their counterparts in other institutional types, they feel motivated by their intrinsic interests to serve students and feel the highest levels of reward when these students find success.

Hirt’s (2006) research provides the most in-depth examination regarding the work of the community college student affairs professionals found in higher education literature. Although
this research does not single out the experiences of new professionals in the community college, these findings can help new professionals understand the inherent nature of this work environment and have some insight regarding how it may fit their professional needs and goals. As an example, Tull, Hirt, and Saunders (2009) reflect on Hirt’s research and suggest that new student affairs professionals need to be quick studies, flexible, and able to embrace rapid change in order to find success and fulfillment in the community college.

In addition to Hirt’s (2006) study, there are other inquiries and insights into the student affairs professional experience in the community college. These include several specific examinations regarding the chief level student affairs role, examinations into the socialization of community college student affairs professionals, and recommendations and best practices regarding community college student affairs administration.

**Community college senior student affairs officers.** One area of empirical research regarding the professional experience of community college student affairs relates specifically to the experiences of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs). In 2014, Tull surveyed 228 SSAOs about their perceptions of their roles, their feelings toward job satisfaction, and intent to leave their positions. The study revealed that those SSAOs who expressed role conflict (i.e., an awareness of contradictory demands on their role) had higher levels of job dissatisfaction and a higher propensity toward wanting to leave their institution. Conversely, SSAOs with positive perceptions of their roles had a significantly lower desire to leave the institution. Tull (2014) concludes that SSAOs who come into their positions with strongly defined role expectations will be more likely to experience role conflicts, and subsequently feel higher levels of job dissatisfaction and a propensity to leave. Tull (2014) recommends that SSAOs should approach their roles knowing that there will be uncertainties and challenges and enter their experience with
a more flexible and malleable set of expectations to be able to better respond to the dynamic and demanding work environment in the community college.

A few dissertations were also found that examined SSAOs roles and professional experiences. Through multiple case studies, Parrent (2013) examined the relationship between student affairs leadership and institutional effectiveness. As required by the accrediting body overseeing the institutions in this study, an institutional effectiveness program is defined as the systems used to set institutional outcomes for student success, the planning process enacted to achieve those outcomes, and the evaluation measures used to determine if, and to what extent, these outcomes have been achieved. Key results of this study indicated that the level of SSAOs’ beliefs in the need for strong institutional effectiveness programs was found to positively influence their participation and engagement in these programs. However, some of the findings indicated that SSAOs did not feel as responsible or connected to the planning and evaluation of institutional effectiveness programs as they would like. Instead, they saw a disproportionate emphasis on academic affairs contributions to these programs and a perceived lack of collaboration between academic and student affairs units in this work. In addition, other key themes emerged among the SSAOs in this study related to a lack of training, student affairs staffing, and funding needed to effectively conduct and implement institutional effectiveness programs. As institutional effectiveness programs are important in developing and demonstrating an institution’s ability to reach student and organizational success outcomes, these are concerning outcomes related to the perceived need of student affairs units to contribute to this work.

Related to the experience of SSAOs, a study was found that examined the views of women of color in this leadership role. Through a phenomenological inquiry of three women of
color who held a SSAO positions in a community college environment, Chock (2007) found that there were common success inhibitors and success catalysts across their experiences. The women in this study indicated that they had faced instances of tokenism, feelings of isolation, and a glass ceiling. These findings were consistent with previous literature regarding the experiences of women of color working in higher education (Chock, 2007). Unique to this study, however, was the finding that congruence with their community college’s mission and the student affairs professional goals and values was a key facilitator for success in their role. These women felt they could overcome many of the barriers to their success if there was high alignment between what they wanted to accomplish professionally and the overarching mission and goals of the institution.

Holloway (2003) also examined the profiles of those serving as a community college SSAO. In this study, 246 SSAOs responded to a request to participate in a survey regarding their positions. The results of the study indicated that community college SSAOs are nearly evenly split between male and female, more than two thirds are White, on average they are 50 years old, the majority hold a master’s degree or higher in higher education, psychology, or counseling, and had, on average, 10 years of progressive experience before taking on their current role. Overall, the respondents were very satisfied with their professional experience. This finding is underscored by the research of Johnsrud, Heck, and Rosser (2000). In their study of 1,293 mid-level student affairs administrators, community college participants reported the highest level of morale compared to those in baccalaureate and research institutions.

Concerning professional competencies needed for community college senior-level student affairs roles, Rodkin (2011) surveyed 308 SSAOs to better understand their profiles and their views regarding the validity and application of the American Association of Community
College’s (2016) Competencies for Community College Leaders. Like the results found by Holloway (2003), the SSAOs in this study were nearly evenly split between males (48%) and females (52%), and the vast majority (75%) were White. Concerning what constituted leadership in their roles and their readiness to perform in this capacity, the participants were in general agreement. Overall, the respondents felt that the AACC’s competencies were highly aligned and relevant to the success of their positions. However, compared to the high rating they gave on the value of the competencies, they rated their readiness to perform these competencies, when they initially took their position, at a significantly lower level. Rodkin (2011) also found that completing an Ed.D. program in higher education, as well as having a significant mentor in the field, had a positive bearing on their feelings of preparedness to enter the role of SSAO and perform these competencies.

The role of SSAO was also examined in terms of how it engages with chief academic officers in the community college. Gulley and Mullendore (2014) studied chief student affairs and chief academic affairs officers’ perceptions regarding collaboration among their units. Although collaboration between academic and student affairs units is a common value embraced in higher education in general, Ozaki and Hornak (2014) assert that it is an even more critical practice in the community college. Based on the populations served in the community college, Ozaki and Hornak (2014) state that these students require more assistance, both in and out of the classroom. The demographics of students entering community colleges shows that higher percentages of these students come from schools that are less likely to academically prepare students for higher education, have lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have parents with lower education levels, and require more developmental coursework. (p. 79)
Ozaki and Hornak conclude that the greater needs of community college students requires greater levels of collaboration and shared resources across academic and student affairs units to best address student barriers and needs.

As previously noted in Hirt’s (2006) research, high levels of collegiality and collaboration were a noted finding concerning relations between student affairs professionals and faculty in the community college. Gulley and Mullendore (2014) confirmed this dynamic and found that there is a high level of commitment for this collaboration in the executive leadership of community college academic and student affairs units. Although there is significant research into the relationships and nature of collaboration between academic and student affairs units in higher education, Gulley and Mullendore (2014) state that the research in this area has not been very diverse. The research that exists is predominately focused on traditional, four-year, residential campuses; and the majority of studies have been grounded in quantitative methodologies. (p. 662)

The goal of their study was to utilize a qualitative method to examine the experiences and perceptions of community college chief academic and student affairs officers concerning collaboration between their units. For this study, three institutions were selected, yielding three pairs of senior officers. In comparison to the levels of collaboration found between academic and student affairs in four-year institutions, Gulley and Mullendore (2014) found a higher level of programmatic and service collaboration in the community college participants. The participants in this study saw themselves and their units as full partners in the delivery of key institutional programs, such as advising, orientation, enrollment services, and student behavior and discipline systems. A strong sense of mutual respect and understanding for their colleagues was a central theme in this study, and was a shared value on student learning and development.
The participants saw time constraints and a lack of knowledge regarding the other unit’s decision-making factors as barriers that may, at times, inhibit cross unit collaboration.

**Preparation and socialization of new community college professionals.** In the body of research regarding student affairs, several studies have examined the preparation and socialization of new professionals. These processes are embedded in the graduate preparation programs and the transition of new student affairs professionals into their first job. As previously mentioned, the research on this topic has nearly all been focused on those who work in a four-year setting, and very little has examined specific experiences of those who work in a community college.

However, a study has recently been published that examines the socialization experience specifically from the perspective of community college professionals. Hornak, Ozaki, and Lunceford (2016) conducted a qualitative inquiry into the socialization of community college student affairs professionals. They describe the need for this study:

professionals who fill student affairs and services roles at community colleges are not always intentionally prepared or socialized into these roles. Much of this formal preparation and intentional practice occurs during graduate work, which is largely hosted at research universities. The issue then becomes translating that training to a different institutional context, like a community college. (p. 118)

More so, Hornak, Ozaki, and Lunceford (2016) believe that this inquiry is needed as previous research shows that the experiential opportunities in student affairs preparation is more influential than classroom learning in the process of helping new professionals understand and navigate the political, cultural, and performance expectations for the institutions in which they begin their careers (Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, & Boyle, 2014). The existing body of
research and literature on these matters would suggest that these immersive experiences occur primarily in the four-year environment, and many students are not as exposed, if at all, to the community college in this capacity. Because students in these graduate preparation programs have little to no experience with the community college, they may find their transition into this institutional type challenging and without the previous exposure and foundation needed to determine if it is a good professional fit.

Through semi-structured interviews with SSAOs, and focus groups with mid-level and entry-level professionals, Hornak, Ozaki, and Lunceford (2016) examined the perspectives of community college student affairs professionals regarding socialization in this institutional type. Seven community colleges were included in this study and the participants were asked to provide feedback on their preparation for work in student affairs at the community college, standards and guidelines used for practice, and ongoing training and professional development. A central theme that emerged concerning the socialization experience of community college student affairs professional was an emphasis on orientation regarding the technical and procedural aspects of their work and less so on their professional identity (Hornak, Ozaki, & Lunceford, 2016). Participants in this study did not have a strong professional identity with student affairs as a career field. This was particularly true of the entry- and mid-level professionals. Hornak, et al. observed that these participants did not use language or references that are typically normed in the profession of student affairs, and they seemed to have limited professional development opportunities outside of their institution or region. Only the SSAOs spoke with a broader and national view of student affairs and seemed to have professional identity qualities more readily associated with the profession.
This dynamic was not true, however, for the segment of participants who were graduates from a student affairs master’s preparation program (Hornak et al., 2016). Those who began working in student affairs without graduate preparation viewed their socialization as mostly on-the-job training and trial-by-error experiences. Whereas those who had student affairs graduate training saw their programs as imperative to their socialization for the field, especially as it related to working with diverse student populations. They noted that “Practitioners who had a formal academic degree in student affairs or higher education had an understanding of the type of work they did and the amount of work required, but were not always intentionally prepared to work at a community college” (p. 128).

Overall, there seemed to be a lack of individual and collective professional development experiences for entry- and mid-level participants (Hornak et al., 2016). When professional development was happening it was mostly initiated by individuals (not as a result of their division or institution), and it was more common among those that had graduate training. Entry- and mid-level professionals who did not have formal training in student affairs seemed less likely to identify with the profession, yet they had a keen understanding of how their institution was unique in the landscape of higher education. The study authors conclude:

The findings demonstrate the importance of institutional context in socializing new professionals. Although the study did not compare our participants’ experiences to those at other types of institutions, the personalized nature of the work and focus on career and life success were evident. If the nature of student affairs work is different in community colleges and four-year institutions, it is important that preparation programs teach students about these differences and for new professionals to be trained to understand the unique nature of student affairs practice in community colleges. (p. 129)
When considering student affairs professionals who enter the community college after completing a graduate preparation program, there is some evidence that suggests that exposure to the community college is minimal in preparation programs. Latz and Royer (2014) found that the instance of community college course offerings in graduate student affairs preparation programs is scant. In their study, participants related that courses on the community college were only required 4.8% of the time and made available as an elective 17.56% of the time.

Another study looked at new professionals’ attitudes regarding community college courses they took while in their graduate programs. Royer, Mulvihill, and Latz (2016) found that those who took community college courses through their graduate programs experienced unexpected positive outcomes, aside from potentially orienting future professionals to work in this environment. In this qualitative study, 12 participants who took a community college course during their preparation program shared feedback on how they perceived the course and how learning from the course influenced their work in the field of student affairs. The findings revealed four major themes. First, the participants indicated that they had a “pragmatic curiosity” (p. 238), such as readying themselves for future employment opportunities in their region, that led them to take the course. Second, they also held initial negative perceptions regarding the community college prior to the class and generally did not have a well-informed understanding of this institutional type. After the class, however, all participants indicated that they found the course to be a significant learning experience and that their awareness and understanding of the community college was considerably improved. Finally, participants revealed that they found significant transferability of the content acquired from the community college course, although none of them ended up working in a community college. They felt that
their awareness of diverse community college students and their needs transferred well into serving students in their current four-year institutions.

In another review of community college student affairs professional, Latz, Ozaki, Royer, and Hornak (2016) used a social justice lens to examine the preparation of new community college student affairs professionals. As the community college serves a proportionately higher number of students who are considered at risk (e.g., low income, requiring developmental education, first generation college status), these authors argue that student affairs graduate preparation programs should be positioned to train future professionals to enter this institutional type and should do so with an intentionality to impact social justice issues in this segment of higher education. Further, they state:

The nature of the community college and its mission distinguishes it from other institutions in higher education in purpose and through the realities of everyday practice; therefore, we argue that it is imperative that the preparation of student affairs professionals at community colleges, and in graduate preparation programs in particular, purposefully include content about and interaction with community colleges to more fully prepare professionals for the realities of their work. (p. 5)

Concerning preparation to work in a community college, Lunceford et al. (2013) surveyed 171 community college student affairs professionals and found that 72% had obtained a master’s degree from a higher education preparation program. From this sample of community college student affairs professionals, only 12.4% indicated that their program had done a very good job in preparing them to work in the community college setting. Lunceford (2014), however, does not place the responsibility to prepare new professionals to be best equipped to
work in the community college solely on the shoulders of graduate programs. Instead, she offers the following perspective:

Excellence in preparing new professionals in student affairs and services at community colleges involves making sure individuals are prepared to perform their professional roles and responsibilities to their full potential, have opportunities and support to continue to learn and develop as professionals and members of the organization, and are valued and able to participate fully as members of the organization. New professionals, supervisors, institutional leadership, and professional communities all have responsibilities in preparing new professionals; it is not the responsibility of a single role or position. Exploring excellence in preparing new professionals must include examining the role of formal education, prior experiences, socialization, and ongoing training and staff development. (p. 14)

The body of empirical research around student affairs work in the community college is not expansive (Latz & Royer, 2014; Royer, Mulvihill, & Latz, 2016; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005). However, the research that has been conducted has presented several common and central themes regarding this collective professional experience. Community colleges are fast-paced and dynamic institutions that respond rapidly to their region’s needs. Subsequently, those who work as community college student affairs professionals experience high levels of work in a fast-paced environment (Helfgot, 2005; Hirt, 2006). Community college student affairs professionals can also be described as highly motivated to serve students, committed to the mission of the community college to serve those who have been historically underrepresented in higher education, and value and experience high levels of collaboration with their faculty colleagues (Hirt, 2006; Gulley & Mullendore, 2014; Tull, 2014). In addition, among graduate
programs and hiring institutions, there seems to be little in terms of intentional preparation and socialization for professionals who begin their careers specifically in the community college (Hornak et al., 2016; Lunceford et al., 2013; Lunceford, 2014).

Non-empirical literature regarding community college student affairs. As previously mentioned, it is important to note that there is a considerable body of writing in higher education journals specific to the community college, and in other sources, that provide insight, perspectives, and recommendations regarding the community college student affairs professional experience. Although empirical research regarding the community college student affairs experience is sparse, sources are readily available regarding best practices in community college student affairs administration. Much of this literature has focused on improving student outcomes through student services and interventions. A summary of these articles are presented in this section to illustrate that, while there are professional insights presented in the body of higher education literature regarding the community college student affairs experience, there is an overall lack of empirical research to support these perspectives. In addition, several key publications, such as The American Community College (Cohen et al., 2014) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2016) are highlighted as important contemporary accounts of the community college that provide an understanding regarding current community college issues, priorities, and best practices.

One of the most important references related to better understanding student affairs in the community college, as well as details on serving community college students and an expansive overview of the community college, is the The American Community College (Cohen et al., 2014). In its sixth edition, this text has been in publication for over 30 years, and has been updated five times to keep up with changes in this institutional type. Arthur Cohen, along with
his wife, Florence B. Brawer, initially authored this book, along with originating the *New Directions for Community College* series, and conducted numerous research studies on the community college (Ignash & Palmer, 2007). *The American Community College* (Cohen et al., 2014) provides a comprehensive overview of the community college including chapters specific to the origin and history of this institution, the student populations served, structures of governance, the faculty experience, finance and management, and student affairs administration (Cohen et al., 2014). Two additional texts have recently been published that offer specific and detailed insight into serving community college students, as well as perspectives into the administration of student affairs in this environment. *Working with Students in Community Colleges*, edited by Kelsay and Zamani-Gallaher (2014) and the *Handbook for Student Affairs in Community Colleges*, edited by Tull, Kuk, and Dalpes (2015) are recent presentations regarding community college student affairs practices.

In addition, several recent studies and initiatives have also focused on improving student success rates in the community college, specifically targeting student affairs administration to lead this work. Two examples of this work include the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2018) and the Achieving the Dream (2018) initiative. CCSSE (2018) is a benchmarking instrument that allows participating institutions to survey their students to determine their rate of engagement and key success indicators and compare their results against like-sized institutions and national leading community colleges. Achieving the Dream (2018) conducts its work through a network of community college research and policy experts, over 200 community college member institutions, and numerous philanthropic organizations to elevate community colleges’ use of institutional and student data to focus on where resources can be
placed and initiatives developed to have the strongest impact on improving institutional effectiveness related to student persistence and completion.

As mentioned previously, where the community college has not appeared frequently in mainstream higher education academic journals, there have been longstanding research publications devoted to this institutional type to help fill this gap in the literature. These include *New Directions for Community Colleges* (2018), *Community College Review* (2018), and the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* (2018). Although these are peer-reviewed scholarly journals, there is a dearth of research regarding the experiences of community college student affairs professionals in these publications. While conducting the research for this study, I came across very few empirical articles regarding experiences specific to community college student affairs professionals. There are certainly articles in these publications that inform and support community college student affairs professionals in their aim to help students achieve success, but they mostly focused on best practices in the administration of higher education/student affairs programs (and not empirical in nature). An example of the topics in these articles include the need for common definitions to be developed regarding the values, roles, missions and, most importantly, student success measures in community college student affairs (Helfgot, 2005). Other topics include the need for elevated collaborations between academic and student affairs units to optimize student success outcomes (Ozaki & Hornack, 2014), the need for community college student affairs units to be more strategic in the recruitment, hiring, orientation, and professional development of new employees in their units (Tyrell, 2014), as well as the overarching professional competencies (Munsch & Cortez, 2014), ethical standards (Hornak, 2009), and multicultural competencies (Martin, 2005) needed for this work.
Toward a Deeper Understanding of New Community College Student Affairs Professionals

The studies and research presented in this chapter will provide a backdrop for my study. Once the data has been collected and analyzed, it will be important to consider the potential findings in the context and analysis provided by previous research related to new student affairs professionals’ preparation, transition, and socialization. It is likely that the participants in my study will relate similar experiences to what is currently found in the body of research related to new student affairs professionals. Noting the findings in my study within the existing body of research will also illustrate at which points this specific professional segment may have unique attributes or experiences, and how these findings could inform future research or practice in the field.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to describe and understand the experiences of new student affairs professionals who begin their careers in the community college. Specifically, this study will examine the lived experiences of new community college student affairs professionals as they transition from their graduate program and begin their first professional role. As discussed in the literature review, this specific experience is not well represented in the body of higher education research. In their book, *Handbook for Student Affairs in Community Colleges*, Tull, Kuk, and Dalpes (2015) indicate that there is very little written about the entry-level student affairs experience in the community college.

The primary goal of this study is to uncover the experiences of new community college student affairs professionals and share the findings with various audiences who interact with and support this population. These audiences include faculty in higher education student affairs preparation programs, managers who hire and supervise new professionals in the community college, higher education professional development organizations, and student affairs graduate program students who are considering their own professional fit in various higher education settings and institutional types.

This chapter outlines the research design, sampling methods, data collection, and analysis protocols that will be used in this study. The primary research question for this study is: What are the lived experiences of new student affairs professionals as they transition into their first professional role in a community college? I seek to understand how this professional population experiences socialization into their first student affairs role in a community college, and how
they would describe their entry into the field. In addition, I seek to understand how this audience specifically describes their decision-making process to work in a community college.

**Overview of Methodology**

This qualitative phenomenological study will focus on the voices of new community college professionals, and how they experience and make meaning of their transition from a graduate program into their first full-time role. The phenomenological tradition of qualitative research aligns well with the objectives of this study because “the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). A phenomenological method is an especially appropriate research approach when there is a lack of knowledge or awareness related to a topic (Creswell, 2013) because this approach can provide an initial and ground level account of this experience by analyzing what all participants share (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016)

According to Seidman (2013), one of the primary and most effective ways a researcher can investigate an educational phenomenon is through the experiences of individuals in that environment, and the best way to get at these experiences is through an in-depth interview process. Moustakas (1994) recommends that researchers who seek answers to qualitative questions about a shared experience should delve fully in order to reveal the essence and meanings of the lived experience, and in depth interviews provide one of the best pathways to this kind of understanding. Therefore, for this study, I will use in-depth interviews to inquire into the shared experience of new community college student affairs professionals.

The process of phenomenological research should inquire into the essential qualities and factors in the research participants’ experiences in order to uncover comprehensive and vivid descriptions of this experience from the participants’ points of view, and not seek to predict or
determine causal relationships (Creswell, 2013). This guidance suggests that in-depth interviews would be an appropriate method to gain the meaning of a shared lived experience of a group of new student affairs professionals. In addition, this guidance offers a note of caution to researchers who have previous connections to the subject and context of the research, such as myself. As a professional who has both worked and taught in community college student affairs, I must be aware of my assumptions, be guarded against personal leanings to predict findings, and establish research guidelines that will minimize and eliminate personal bias. The approach recommended by research experts to guard against this is the practice of bracketing, whereby the researcher identifies their personal beliefs, attitudes, and bias about the phenomena in question and keeps those matters outside of the research inquiry, thus protecting or bracketing the voice and experiences of the research participants (Gearing, 2008). It is important to note that this practice is not accomplished in a specific instance in the research protocol. Rather, bracketing should start at the initiation of the research process, such as in the formation of research questions, and continue throughout the data collection and analysis processes (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Rather than a singular act, bracketing is a constant position held by the researcher to mitigate the influence of their assumptions and previous experiences on the outcomes of research.

**Sampling and Participant Selection**

This study used purposeful sampling to generate a pool of research participants that would produce information-rich examples of the phenomena being studied (Merriam, 2009). The first step used in developing a sampling plan was to identify criteria essential to selecting appropriate research participants. This study involved participants who:

1. Have graduated from a master’s higher education/student affairs program.
2. Are considered new professionals (i.e., no more than five years of working full time in the field of student affairs and higher education).

3. Have secured a full-time student affairs position at a public community college after completing their graduate program and are still at this institution or another community college (i.e., not working in a four-year institution).

Concerning role and program completion, I relied on participants to confirm their completion of a master’s program, that they identify as a student affairs professional, and that they have worked in the field for less than five years. The designation of five years in the field is being used as it is a common time frame among research in higher education to designate a new professional’s status (Cliente, Henning, Skinner, Kennedy & Sloan, 2006; Mather, Smith & Skipper, 2010; Renn & Hodges, 2007). In addition, those who responded to the call for volunteers were not included if they previously worked full time in the community college. This study seeks to understand the experiences of students who have graduated from higher education preparation programs and then choose to work in the community college.

In the community college, participation in a graduate preparation program may not necessarily be the most common pathway into a student affairs position. Tull, Kuk, and Dalpes (2016) share that student affairs professionals may enter their position through previous part-time work or clerical positions in the institution, or through previous roles held as a student employee, and often without attainment of a student affairs related master’s degree.

However, in the existing literature, it is believed that the vast majority of new practitioners enter the profession through the completion of a related master’s degree program (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Consequently, the literature on student affairs preparation and transition largely describes the experiences of students who typically enter a graduate program
soon after completion of their undergraduate degree and do not have prior full-time higher education professional experience. As such, this study seeks to understand the experiences and context most represented in the literature related to new community college student affairs professionals. Although exploring the attributes, experiences, and pathways of those who become community college student affairs professionals via less known avenues would make for an interesting study, this inquiry will focus on the entry experience most well documented in the literature of higher education.

Concerning the selection of participants, Rudestam and Newton (2007) advise that two main issues need to be addressed in any successful and ethical research study. First, participants must only participate when they have been fully informed on the research design and protocol, provided consent, and emerge from the experience unharmed. These outcomes were central in the implementation of this research. The steps used to ensure that participants’ safety was first and foremost is described in more detail below. In addition, all of the data collected in this research was secured and remained confidential. Pseudonyms were used in lieu of participant names during the data analysis and reporting processes. The participants were asked to select their own pseudonyms, as this allowed some control on their behalf to protect their anonymity. Lastly, participants were notified that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any recourse, and that any data collected would be destroyed and omitted from analysis and any reporting.

Snowball and opportunistic strategies were used to invite potential volunteers to participate (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This sampling criterion, noted in the section above, was integrated into a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix C) and used to screen volunteers to determine their eligibility to participate in the study. Snowball sampling uses the assistance of
people or organizations that can help identify possible cases that will qualify as sample subjects (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Using this approach, I reached out to specific community college groups in the primary professional development organizations in higher education student affairs. These groups included College Student Educators International (ACPA) and NASPA. I reached out to the community college committees in these organizations, and sent them my invitation to participate and information via email. In addition, I reached out to my professional network of student affairs professionals and higher education graduate program faculty and asked for their assistance in locating potential volunteers. I requested that they post the invitation to participate in my study via their websites, social media accounts, email distribution lists, or any other venue they saw as an effective way to reach likely volunteers. The request used to advertise this study can be found in Appendix A.

In addition to the snowball method, I employed an opportunistic sampling strategy as well. As the name suggests, opportunistic capitalizes on contacts and networking opportunities that emerge throughout the course of the research project (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). When referred to me by colleagues and contacts, I pursued leads that put me in touch with professionals who may have met the sampling criterion of this study. For these new contacts, I offered the same advertising request that I shared with the professional organizations (Appendix A).

Once volunteers were identified, I sent them an invitation via email to participate (Appendix B). The invitation asked them to reply and complete the participant questionnaire (Appendix C) and read and agree to the informed consent document (Appendix D). The online participant questionnaire was used to screen volunteers to determine if they met the sampling criteria.
When a questionnaire was returned, I reviewed the responses to determine if they met the sampling criteria. In some cases, this required me to send the respondent an email to clarify any previous work experience (to ensure it did not disqualify their eligibility to participate). For those volunteers who did not meet the sampling criteria, I sent them a communication thanking them for their interest and informing them that they were not eligible for the study (Appendix E). Volunteers who returned the questionnaire and met the sampling criteria received a communication confirming their participation (Appendix F). In this communication, the volunteers were asked to respond to a scheduling request for an interview time and to read and endorse the consent document to confirm their participation. In the event the volunteer did not respond within seven days, a follow-up message was sent requesting their confirmation to participate and seeking their participation in a scheduling tool to set up the interview (Appendix G). If there was no response beyond this point, the volunteer was no longer considered an active participant unless they reinitiated communication.

When determining the number of participants needed for a successful phenomenological study, two main criteria need to be satisfied (Seidman, 2013). One, the sample size should be large enough to yield results that cover the range of possible participants and sites in the range of the study. Two, the sample size should be enough to reach saturation of information. Saturation is defined as the instance when a researcher begins to hear the same information reported again and again in interviews (Seidman, 2013). These sample size criteria require a level of conjecture to forecast a number that satisfies this requirement. The number of participants can vary based on the nature of the research topic and the population being considered, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer to an exact sample size (Merriam, 2009). However, Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, and Morales (2007) recommend between five to 25 individuals for a phenomenological...
study to develop the full possibilities of the shared experience. There is likely a smaller population of professionals that meet my study’s criteria, and reaching this audience may prove challenging. Since this is likely a less common phenomenon in comparison to new professionals working in a four-year institution, I sought a range of 8 to 12 participants for this study.

Once I initiated my call for participants, I received a total of 21 responses. Nine of these respondents met the sampling criteria and completed the process to setup and conduct an interview. Of the other 12 respondents, three met the criteria but did not respond to the invitation for an interview, and the other nine did not meet the sampling criteria.

Data Collection

The primary mode of phenomenological data collection is through in-depth interviews (Maxwell, 2013). According to Merriam (2009), there are three primary types of interviews: highly structured/standardized, semi-structured, and unstructured/informal. Based on the phenomenon that this study seeks to understand, the semi-structured protocol is a strong fit. This approach allows the researcher the ability to ask a set of questions to create a foundation of consistency across all interview participants. Semi-structured interviews also allow the participants to inform the direction of the conversation and for the researcher to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification throughout the interview (Merriam, 2009). This protocol (Appendix I) included a list of prescribed questions, yet allowed space for the interview subjects to expound upon their experiences and for me to pose appropriate follow-up questions. If the participants did not respond to each question with much detail, I composed a list of follow-up prompts that allowed me to ask additional question in each subject area to gain more insight.

To increase research accuracy, this study utilized a pilot interview prior to the start of the formal data collection. Creswell (2007) recommends using a pilot interview prior to data
collection with an individual who meets the sample criterion to allow the researcher an opportunity to evaluate if the subjects can answer all of the interview questions and determine if the questions need any refinement. This pilot also allows the researcher to reflect on the interview and determine if he/she exhibited any overt biases that may interfere with the study (Seidman, 2013). In a pilot interview, the researcher may also seek feedback from a research expert on the outcome of the experience regarding how to improve and refine the interview protocol. In the event that the pilot yields significant feedback that requires substantive changes to the interview protocol, these changes will be returned to the sponsoring Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) for consideration and approval.

In this case, my pilot interview confirmed that my proposed protocol was adequate and worked well. The pilot was conducted at a distance using an online conference software (the same that was used for all interviews in this study). The participant was an acquaintance that met my sampling criteria. This pilot interview lasted just over an hour and was fluid and very conversational. As a follow up, I asked the pilot interview participant if she had any feedback on the process. She shared that it was an enjoyable experience for her, that the questions provided an opportunity for her to really reflect on the experiences that led to her current position, and that she felt the flow of the conversation was very good. She did not have any recommendations on how to improve the process nor did she have any additional salient matters she wanted to convey about her related professional experiences after the interview. Subsequently, no changes were made to the interview protocol as a result of the pilot interview.

Although I would have preferred to meet with my participants face to face, all of the participants were outside of my geographic region. Instead, GoToMeeting web conferencing software was used to meet with the interview participants. In addition, the recording service
provided by this software was used to record the conversation, and permission for this recording was be obtained as a part of the consent agreement. Although I used this method to record all interviews, I also took notes during the process as well. I did not take notes to serve as a verbatim or secondary account of the interview. Rather, I tried to capture the nonverbal elements of the conversation, such as times when the participants use sarcasm, considerable verbal emphasis, or other affective cues that added to the conveyance of their ideas and experiences. Each interview lasted about 45-55 minutes. At the conclusion of each interview, a note (Appendix J) was sent to each participant thanking them for their time and participation, as well as reminding them of next steps and related time frames.

I submitted the interview recordings to an online professional service for transcription. This was an automated, computer generated transcript service though the company Temi. Based on estimation of the process, the transcriptions of the voice recording were about 80% accurate. Once these transcripts drafts were complete through the automated service, I reviewed each one using the provided editing tools. This allowed me to listen to each recording while simultaneously reviewing the transcript to make edits and ensure accuracy.

**Data Analysis**

Creswell’s (2007) six-step data analysis procedure for phenomenological research was used as the analysis process for this study. This approach provided a tested and scripted protocol to methodically review and analyze data.

**Step One**

The first step in this procedure asks the researcher to describe their personal and professional experience with the phenomenon that is being considered. This activity is an effort to identify and bracket the researcher’s experience related to the research questions so they may
minimize their bias and focus on analyzing the data provided by the participants. This first step has been initiated in chapter one of this study, under the heading, Researcher’s Statement. In this section, I have articulated my personal and professional biases, assumptions, and presumptions related to the focus of this study. This practice allowed me to define my viewpoints, hold these separately and distinctly, and focus on the words, viewpoints, and insights provided by the participants. Throughout this process, I reflected on my previous experiences and personal biases to develop a state of mindfulness so I could hold those matters at a distance and allow the voices of my participants to fully emerge and stand on their own.

**Step Two**

The second step of the data analysis process requires a review of the interview transcripts with the intent to document all of the significant non-repeating and non-overlapping statements present in the data (Creswell, 2007). The second step is referred to as horizontalization of the data. Prior to this step, I increased my familiarity with each transcript by concurrently playing the recording of the interview and going over any notes I took during the interview. I merged my notes, sequentially, into the transcript (to provide additional illustration and depth where relevant), and I used the recording as a way to verify the accuracy of the transcript.

At the conclusion of this step, I sent a copy of the transcript to the corresponding participant. I included a message (Appendix K) asking them to review the transcript to ensure it is accuracy and that it correctly conveys the meanings and perspectives they meant to share during our conversation. Where they felt there was any inaccuracy or instances at which they would like to clarify their statements, those remarks were added as annotations to the transcripts and considered in the data analysis process. In addition, I used this opportunity to seek clarification from the participants if needed. Based on this process, there were minimal changes
to the transcripts based on participant feedback. Of the nine participants, only three replied to this request. One provided grammatical updates to her transcripts, which did add some clarity. The other two who responded said their transcripts were accurate and offered no changes.

Once this step was completed, I continued with Creswell’s (2007) process of horizontalization. This step requires a review of the data to record all the salient ideas without determining the relationship between them, or utilizing a practice of evaluation or synthesis until all the information has been initially canvassed. The principle behind this approach is to reserve any form of analysis so that each salient theme has an opportunity to emerge and be considered. Having first read each transcript while concurrently reviewing the recorded interview, I focused my second reading with a goal of documenting each potential salient statement. Once all of the transcripts had been reviewed for the second time, I had compiled a summary document for each participant that included all of the unique ideas and experiences that they had shared, as well as description and quotes that provided more depth to each of these experiences.

Step Three

In the third step, the list of salient statements is reviewed with the intent to draw potential connections, identify statements and ideas that repeat multiple times (perhaps in slightly different ways), and hone in on points at which emerging essential and central experiences and themes may arise across all or most of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Since this study is examining relatively unique experiences a prefigured or technical coding technique would not be appropriate for this step. Instead, Marshall and Rossman (2011) recommend the use of an emergent coding method. In using this method, I approached the data naively, without any rules of categorization, and allowed themes to emerge based on the information present.
I then worked with the nine participant interview summaries to analyze where there were common experiences across most or all of the participants. To help visualize these many data points, I employed the software program Prezi to lay out each participant and connect them with the salient ideas and experiences they shared. I had initially planned to conduct this part of the process using sticky notes to document each salient point from the transcript and map them on a board or wall where I could move and reorganize the sticky notes based on connections and groupings. However, I found it difficult to identify a physical space where I could do this work over a period of time and ensure it would not be subject to tampering.

Instead, I used the software Prezi to make a virtual “white board” where I could lay out each participant and their corresponding data points. I then created a presentation path through each participant and their data. I then spent time reviewing all participants’ data multiple times and started to note at which points I felt there were groupings and connections between data across multiple participants. Once I noted significant groups of shared and similar experiences, I created a spreadsheet with multiple tabs. Each tab represented a separate group of like ideas and experiences. In each tab I listed quotes and examples of that shared experiences, as well as quotes to illustrate these ideas.

**Steps Four and Five**

Working with an organized and structured list of emergent and common ideas, experiences, and attitudes, I focused on developing these into descriptions of essential themes. Developing these descriptions represents the fourth and fifth steps in the data analysis process for which the researcher writes two separate descriptions of the emergent themes (Creswell, 2007). The first description focuses on what the participants in the study experienced. This description is referred to as the textural description and describes specifically what happened (step four).
This description includes verbatim excerpts from the data to illustrate and provide backing examples. The second description focuses on how the experience happened and is considered the structural description (step five). In the development of the structural description it is important to also include some of the contextual elements (e.g., conditions, situational elements, relational matters, etc.).

**Step Six**

In the last step, a final composite description, including both textural and structural elements, is drafted (Creswell, 2007). This description is a summation of both what the participants experienced and how it was experienced. This is an effort to document the essential experiences of this population in detail and present the findings in a manner that a reader of this study will emerge with a strong sense of what it means to have had such an experience. These descriptions are presented in chapter four.

**Accuracy and Trustworthiness**

Another important step in any qualitative research is to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness. Developing trustworthiness (i.e., the overall quality of the research process) is paramount to the practice of ethical and valid research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In addition to developing trustworthiness in the research, validating the accuracy of the findings and interpreting the data should occur intermittently throughout the study as well as at its conclusion (Daytner, 2006). Several strategies are available to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness in a study. This study utilized three primary forms: member checking, an external audit of the findings, and a pilot interview.

As previously mentioned, a pilot interview was used to evaluate the efficacy of the interview protocol and make any necessary changes prior to the start of data collection. This
step allowed the interview protocol to be vetted and tested. In addition, this study incorporated the use of member checking in the initial phases of the analysis process. In this member checking phase, I asked the research participants to review the data to determine if it was accurate, complete, fair, and representative (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In both the case of the pilot interview and the member checking process, no significant changes or concerns were raised with the research process.

A final check for trustworthiness occurred through an external audit. A draft of the composite themes was presented to an external auditor. The candidate for this audit has served as a research officer for a large community college for more than 20 years. She was asked to review these composites to determine if they stood on their own as concise, complete, and rational themes, and that verbatim quotes provided strength and coherence to the themes. Overall, her feedback indicated that the themes were complete and made sense. She offered some feedback to use consistent language in two of the themes, as to not introduce new or confusing terms that may cause some confusion to the readers. These changes were incorporated into chapter four.

Finally, to contribute to the overall trustworthiness of this research, transparency in the process and protocol has been provided in this chapter so that other researchers would be able to follow this prescribed method and arrive at similar findings. The ability to confirm a study’s process and findings improves the validity and trustworthiness of said research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It is important to also note that this study was approved by the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. A copy of the approval is provided in Appendix L.
Limitations and Delimitations

The final step in the research process is to uncover possible limitation in the study. Limitations are defined as the systematic biases inherent in a study that are not necessarily in the control of the researcher (Price & Murnan, 2004). These limitations can assist future researchers who are interested in further exploring the subject matter and developing stronger follow-up studies (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In addition, limitations help the reader identify boundaries in applying and generalizing the findings from the study.

In the case of this study, one limitation noted is my inherent biases as a professional in the community college and the relationship these biases hold with the topic of this research. A more complete and reflective review of this study’s limitations are presented in chapter five.

It is important to identify a study’s delimitations as well. A delimitation is defined as the boundaries and scope of a study (Simon, 2011). The sampling criteria determines the main delimitations of this study. This study focused on the experiences of student affairs professionals who have been in their role for five years or less, began their career at a public community college, have completed a student affairs or higher education master’s degree, and do not have any previous, full-time higher education experience. This inevitably exclude new student affair professionals working in other institutional types, as well as new community college professionals who have had full-time previous higher education experience before completing their master’s degree.

Summary

The qualitative research method selected for this study was selected to develop greater knowledge regarding a specific professional population. Since little is known regarding new community college student affairs professionals, an important entry point is researching and
presenting their experience. The goal of phenomenology is to present the shared essence of a lived experience. As such, a phenomenological research approach is an appropriate methodology to inquire into this relatively unknown topic.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to examine and present the lived experiences of new community college student affairs professionals. The primary issue this study seeks to address is the lack of knowledge and understanding regarding this professional population that currently exists in the literature of higher education. Nearly all of the literature and research regarding those who complete graduate programs and work in the field of student affairs appears in the context of four-year colleges and universities (Latz & Royer, 2014). In general, the community college remains less visible in the body of mainstream higher education research compared to research regarding four year institutions (Latz & Royer, 2014; Royer, Mulvihill, & Latz, 2016). Concerning empirical research and literature on the preparation and socialization of new community college student affairs professionals, especially compared to those in four-year institutions, even less documentation is available (Latz & Royer, 2014; Royer, Mulvihill, & Latz, 2016; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005).

To better understand the lived experiences of new community college student affairs professionals, I employed phenomenological inquiry and interviewed nine participants who offered details about their transition and socialization into the field of higher education. This inquiry was specific to those who completed graduate programs and whose first position in higher education was in a community college. This chapter contains a brief summary of the data collected and analysis processes, profiles of the interview participants, and a presentation of themes that emerged from an analysis of their interviews.
Participant Profiles

This study used purposeful sampling to generate a pool of research participants that would produce information-rich examples of the phenomena being studied (Merriam, 2009). This study invited participants who:

1. Have graduated from a master’s higher education/student affairs program.
2. Are considered new professionals (i.e., no more than five years of working full time in the field of student affairs and higher education).
3. Have secured a full-time student affairs position at a public community college after completing their graduate program and are still at this institution or another community college (i.e., not working in a four-year institution).

By completing and submitting the online questionnaire, 21 volunteers responded to the invitation to participate in this study. Nine of these met the sampling criteria and completed an interview. Profiles of these nine participants are provided below. Also, a summary of the participants, including their roles, institutional classification, institutional region, and the amount of time they have served in their role are presented in Table 1. The participants are presented in the order that their interviews occurred. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants’ confidentiality, and any specific description of their educational or work institutions have been omitted.
Table 1

**Summary of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position/Role</th>
<th>Institutional Classification*</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time in Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Enrollment specialist</td>
<td>Large community college</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Four years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Residential director</td>
<td>Small community college</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Four years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hailey</td>
<td>International student coordinator</td>
<td>Large community college</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Less than a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Research specialist</td>
<td>Medium community college</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Less than a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amal</td>
<td>Associate director of global learning</td>
<td>Large community college</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>One year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Residential Director/Student life coordinator</td>
<td>Medium community college</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>One year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Retention specialists</td>
<td>Medium community college</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Three years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Foster care specialist</td>
<td>Large community college</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>A year and a half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Academic advisor</td>
<td>Large community college</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Four years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2018)

**Beth**

Beth serves as an enrollment specialist at a large urban community college in the Midwest. While attending her undergraduate institution, Beth became very involved in student leadership and campus activities. Through these experiences, and the encouragement of a student affairs professional at her university, she decided to pursue a master’s degree in higher education/student affairs immediately after finishing her bachelor’s degree.
Beth was one of the six participants who had some community college exposure prior to her first professional role in one. During the summer between the first and second year of her graduate program, Beth returned home for the summer and sought opportunities to fulfill her internship requirements. She responded to one online posting for a position at a community college near her home and reached out to a second community college in her area to see if they had any opportunities. She indicated that this was her first exposure to a community college personally, and the first exposure she had while in her graduate program.

Her experience interning at two community colleges certainly influenced her decision to seek employment in a community college when she completed her master’s programs. After graduation, she returned to her home area and was regionally bound in her job search process. Subsequently, she took a less-than-ideal initial position as a clerical/support staff member at a regional community college. After less than two years in this role, Beth was able to apply and fill a role as an enrollment specialist in the same institution. She has been at her current institution for just over four years.

Ruth

Ruth is another participant who had some community college experience prior to her first professional role. Although she did not have any experience as a student at a community college, she held a part-time AmeriCorps Vista role at a community college between her undergraduate and graduate programs. Currently, she serves as a resident director at a small rural community college in the Midwest. Ruth’s role is new as her hiring coincided with the opening of the first residence life facility at her institution. At the time of our interview, she had been in her position for nearly four years.
Ruth described her entry into higher education in a similar way to other participants. She had shared that she had been highly involved in student life in her undergraduate program, and a resident director had suggested that she consider the field of student affairs for her career. Due to her experience at a community college through her AmeriCorps experience she actively sought a role at a community college at the conclusion of her graduate program.

Hailey

Hailey serves as an international student coordinator at a large urban institution in the South. She completed her undergraduate and graduate programs at the same four-year institution. While an undergraduate student, she participated in study abroad experiences that sparked an interest to join the field of higher education/student affairs. In addition, her interest in international education influenced her interest to hold a role in higher education that worked with international student populations. She finished her master’s program in May 2017 and had been in her current role for just over six months when we spoke.

In her current role she recruits and support international students through their enrollment experience at her community college. In addition, she provides support services for this population, such as academic advising, and has recently started advising a new international student organization. In addition, Hailey works with the English language learners at her college.

Ann

Ann serves as a research specialist at a medium-sized community college in a suburban area on the East Coast. In addition to supporting the research and reporting requirements for her institution, she also coordinates a grant to strengthen her institution’s support for their Hispanic student population.
Ann was the only participant who had attended a community college herself. After graduating from a community college and transferring to a four-year institution, Ann pursued an interest to become a student affairs professional in a community college. Prior to enrolling in her graduate program, she served at a community college on a part-time basis through AmeriCorps. In this role, she developed and implemented a food pantry program. After this experience, she enrolled in and completed a master’s degree in higher education/student affairs, and specifically sought work in a community college.

After completing her graduate degree, she worked in a community college in a grant funded position overseeing academic advising programs. After a year in this role, she accepted her current position. At the time we spoke, she had been in the new role for just over five months.

Amal

Amal had the most unique path into the field of higher education/student affairs. As an undergraduate student, she had a study abroad experience in the Middle East that greatly shaped her interest in international education. This interest led her to work on the opening of an Arabic language school in her home city. After doing this work for a few years, she relocated to the Middle East to work on international education initiatives.

After her mother became ill, Amal returned to the states to provide care. She then sought out a career in higher education as a way to continue her passion for international affairs and education. She enrolled in a higher education/student affairs graduate program. Upon completion, she took a position at a large urban community college on the East Coast as an associate director leading global learning initiatives. When we spoke, she had been at her institution for just over a year. In her role she works with faculty to integrate global learning
outcomes across curriculum, as well as supporting programs that help student learning in this area.

**Sophia**

Sophia serves as a resident director and student life coordinator at a medium-sized urban community college on the East Coast. At the time of the interview, she had been at her institution for a year and several months. Wearing two hats, she provides oversight of a 500-bed residence hall, and student involvement programming for the entire college. She shares the student involvement responsibilities with another residence life professional.

Sophia described her entry into the field of higher education as a result of her involvement as a resident advisor during her undergraduate program. After completing her undergraduate degree, Sophia enrolled in a higher education/student affairs graduate program. While there, she gained some exposure to the community college. Her graduate program included several certificate options for degree specialization. She chose the community college certificate. This choice was not necessarily based on interest. Instead, she shared that this was due to the fact that the community college certificate course was available online, and she needed flexibility, since her graduate assistantship was at a considerable distance from her graduate institution. She felt that her participation in the community college certificate program influenced her decision to seek work in this specific environment.

**Rosa**

Rosa serves as a retention specialist at a medium suburban community college on the East Coast. She has been in her role for just over three years. Like most of the other participants, she attributed her student involvement while attending college as an undergraduate as a primary influencer in her interest to pursue a career in higher education/student affairs.
After finishing her undergraduate degree, she explored a career in teaching K-12. However, after a discussion with an admission representative for graduate programs, she decided that a career in higher education would be a better fit.

In her role as a retention specialist, Rosa works with students across their educational experience. She provides wraparound services, including financial aid, advising, counseling, and other supports for a large caseload. Her work at her institution began through a grant-funded student success coach role, through which she worked with first time students. She was then able to apply for her current permanent position, and she now works with both new and returning students.

Rose

When we spoke, Rose was transitioning into a new position at her current institution. She began working at a large urban community college in the Midwest as a support professional in the area of student conduct. At the time of our interview she had recently been at her institution for nearly a year and a half. When we spoke, she shared that recently accepted a new position in student affairs. The role was focused on supporting students who had previously been engaged with youth foster care programs.

Rose had attended both undergraduate and graduate programs with the intent of teaching English at the post-secondary level. However, after enrolling in a student affairs course in a master’s program (as an elective), Rose found a new passion and changed her program to begin a career in higher education/student affairs. Like several of other participants, Rose had some personal experience with the community college prior to seeking employment at one. Her now-husband had left the four-year institution they had attended together and transferred to their regional community college. Rose observed him flourish in the community college environment,
at which he received much-needed support that was lacking in his university experience. This sparked an interest in her to work in the community college environment in the future.

**Elizabeth**

Elizabeth began her career at a community college in a grant-funded position that was new to her institution. The focus of the grant was to implement an early alert system. In addition, Elizabeth serves as an academic advisor at her large suburban community college.

She attended a four-year state university for her undergraduate degree. Like other participants, she did not initially consider a career in higher education/student affairs. She cited her involvement in Greek Life and relationships with student affairs professionals as primary influencers that led her to consider a higher education/student affairs career path and to seek a graduate preparation degree for this field. She did not have any specific community college exposure prior to her first position.

However, one of her graduate internships was at a college that served a population similar to that of a community college. She felt this positive internship experience led her to consider the community college for a future role. She likened the student population at her internship, with whom she really enjoyed working, as similar to those served in a community college. When we spoke, Elizabeth had been at her institution for just over four years. Her institution is a large community college situated in a suburban area on the East Coast.

**Data Collection and Analysis Summary**

The nine interviews for this study were conducted over a two-month period. All of the interviews were conducted at a distance using the online meeting software GoToMeeting. On average, the interviews lasted 50 minutes each. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using the cloud software solution Temi. After all the transcripts were reviewed and
edited for accuracy, member checking was employed to increase the validity and trustworthiness of this study. Each transcript was sent to the respective participant. They were asked to review the transcripts for clarity and accuracy. Of the nine participants, only three responded. Two participants indicated that the transcripts were accurate and clear, and the third suggested a few suggested edits. These edits were only grammatical in nature and did not add any new content or data.

I created a summary document from each interview transcript. This was the first step in the data analysis process. The summary document provided a brief overview of each participant, including their current position, the characteristics of their institution, and any other details about their interview process. I then used the process of horizontalization to extract and record each salient point made by each participant in their interview. Horizontalization is a strategy to list all the significant non-repeating and non-overlapping statements present in the data (Creswell, 2007). This process allows each transcript to be reviewed without a predetermined rubric or evaluation system. The process of horizontalization affords the voices of the participants to be fully documented and considered before analysis is conducted.

After each transcript had been converted into a summary document, the horizontalization of the data was moved into a graphical presentation. Initially, I had intended to use sticky notes to record each of the data points, and place them onto a physical wall or board so I could physically move them to group like ideas and show relationships between the data. However, I was unable to locate a physical space in which I knew I could keep these notes up for a period of time and feel confident that they would not be disturbed. Instead, I considered a digital solution for this part of the analysis process.
I used the presentation software Prezi to record and organize all of the salient points made by each participant. In this manner, Prezi served as a large whiteboard where I could organize and visually display a lot of information on digital plane. This allowed me to make a large map of all the participants and their connected representative points and experiences. I made a presentation path to each of the participants and their subsequent experiences, views, and related quotes. I proceeded to review this presentation path multiple times and record groups of ideas or experiences that seemed consistent across most, if not all, of the participant’s data sets.

As groups of ideas began to emerge, I set up a spreadsheet to categorize and organize similar groupings. I used separate tabs for each significant groups of experiences. Initially, I observed five groups (five tabs). In each tab I listed all the main ideas and their associated examples, quotes, and participants. This approach allowed me to determine if the experience or idea was connected to all, or a majority, of the participants, and observe how it may have manifested in similar or different ways among participants. Eventually, these five groups of emergent themes were condensed into four final theme groups and then developed into narrative statements.

**Emergent Themes**

The themes that emerged from the data analysis addressed four major areas of the participants’ experience. These areas included how participants experienced their entry into the field of higher education, as well as entry into their first professional role in the community college, how they described their work environments, how they described serving community college students, and how they characterized the student affairs viewpoint in the community college setting. The four major themes are described in more detail below and presented in summary in Table 2.
Table 2

Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Title</th>
<th>Corresponding Sub-themes</th>
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| Theme 1 Finding a Hidden Path into Higher Education and the Community College | • “Fell into it”  
• Community college exposure matters  
• Experiencing limited community college exposure in graduate programs       |
| Theme 2 Adjusting to Unexpected Work Conditions                              | • The pace is fast and the workloads are considerable  
• “Never a dull moment”                                                        |
| Theme 3 The Needs of Community College Students Exceeded Initial Expectations | • Students are the greatest reward and the greatest challenge  
• Experiencing a gap in preparation                                             |
| Theme 4 Where is the Student Affairs Perspective?                            | • “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it”  
• Recognizing their colleagues’ lack of student affairs training               |

Theme One: Finding a Hidden Path into Higher Education and the Community College

Theme one details how participants described their entry into both the field of higher education and their entry into the community college as a new student affairs professional. All participants described their path into higher education as unclear, and that they did not readily come upon it while they studied as undergraduate students. Similarly, for several of the participants, their eventual path into the community college was not clear as either.

There were three sub-themes related to this experience. The first sub-theme relates to how all of the participants described their entry into higher education as a divergence from their initial career objectives and many shared that they “fell into the field.” The second sub-theme
addresses how exposure to the community college seemed to have an influence on participants’ awareness of the community college as a viable organization for their future professional pursuits. The third theme summarizes how most of the participants viewed the exposure of the community college in their graduate experience.

“Fell into it.” In this sub-theme, all of the nine participants indicated that a career in higher education was not initially considered in their plans as they pursued their bachelor’s degree. They reached a decision to pursue a career in higher education student affairs either late in their undergraduate experience or not until after they graduated. Most participants linked their eventual interest to enter the field of higher education with some form of student activity involvement they had as an undergraduate student (e.g., housing, student life, Greek life, leadership, student employment). Several participants cited a relationship with a student affairs professional as a tipping point that led them to consider a career in higher education student affairs. This was illustrated well when Ruth, a resident director at a small rural community college, shared a conversation she had while attending college as an undergrad.

I was having lunch with one of my resident directors and she said, “Well, you know, you can do this professionally, right? You could come work in housing. You could come do this.” And it never occurred to me that was an option. And so I started looking into it, and I knew grad school had to be something.

Another example of student affairs being a hidden career path was shared by Rose. She described how she had studied English in her undergraduate program with the goal of becoming a college professor in this subject area. Upon the completion of her undergraduate degree, she enrolled in a creative writing graduate program. While in that program, practicum experiences in
teaching revealed that this discipline may not suit her as well as she had hoped. It was by chance that she took an elective class in student affairs and found her passion and career path. She said:

Through that I learned that I really didn't want to teach. There were other barriers that students were facing that I wanted to be able to address and so just repeating the same content in the classroom, that didn't really seem like my thing. So I moved back to my home state and started a different writing program there while I kind of figured out what I wanted to do. And I actually ended up taking one student affairs class while I was doing that. I was just thinking, OK, if I am going to keep on this teaching path, what are some other tools that could help me? And I just fell in love with the class and switched programs, and stayed there.

In Hailey’s experience, as another example of falling into the field, it wasn’t until after she finished her bachelor’s degree that she became aware of a career in higher education/student affairs. A meeting with a friend from college who worked as a resident director sparked her interest to enter the field of student affairs:

I became really good friends with my supervisor from when I was an RA in my undergrad. And I remember just thinking, like, wait there's a job like this. You get paid to do this. You just live in my building and you hang out with us. I mean, obviously, there was a lot more to that, but I didn't know that at the time. But I just thought it was really a cool job prospect, and so she told me you know, “Hey, why don't you try getting your master's in higher ed. They'll pay for it and all that.” So it kind of became an opportunity that sort of fell into my lap. It wasn't like I always dreamed of being a student affairs professional or anything like that.
Although all of the participants in this study did not see a career in higher education/student affairs early or clearly while in their undergraduate programs, there were some shared factors that led them to pursue this career path. One of these factors was involvement in campus life. It seems that most of the participants had positive student life experiences while completing their undergraduate degree, and that these experiences were a connection to their eventual interest to pursue a degree and career in higher education/student affairs. Another factor that was frequently cited as a point of influence was a relationship with a student affairs professional who served as an advisor or mentor while the participant was pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

Beth shared an example that illustrates both involvement in campus life and encouragement from a student affairs professional as factors that led her to consider a career in higher education/student affairs. She said:

So it was during that time while I was working in student life that my direct supervisor, who was our coordinator of student involvement, really kind of just saw something in me that I guess I didn't really see. Because I was always kind of a really shy girl who wasn't very outgoing, and just kind of kept to herself. But she saw how hard a worker I was, and how I really worked well with the other students. She promoted me that next semester to a senior student worker position, even though I had only been working there for a term. And that's when she kind of sat down and talked to me about working in higher education as a career.

As another example, Sophia revealed that her undergraduate experiences in residence life and with a housing professional development organization, National Association of College and University Residence Halls, cemented her interest to pursue a career in higher education/student affairs.
affairs. She said that it was these involvements and the mentors with whom she interacted that drove her toward a career in higher education/student affairs. She said, “It was how, as a student, I found my home. It’s an organization that got me very much excited about college and be more comfortable with who I am.” She then shared that this influenced her decision to pursue a graduate degree in higher education/student affairs immediately after finishing her undergraduate program.

Although involvement in campus life and relationships with advisors were a common thread of influence to enter the field of higher education/student affairs, it did not provide immediate clarity for participants to go into this field. This is very well illustrated through Rosa’s experience. As she reflected on her path into her current position as retention specialist, she shared details about her high levels of involvement in Greek Life and relationships with her advisors and the dean of students. Yet she revealed that at that time, she still did not consider higher education a viable career option. She said, “I mean, even through all of that, I kind of just wanted to do education. Not really so much higher education.” To test her interest in the field of education, she interned at a regional high school. Through that experience she decided to explore school psychology and applied for a graduate program to work in the K-12 environment. It was during her interview with the admission representative that she realized higher education was the best fit for her, and she changed her program to focus on higher education/student affairs.

**Community college exposure matters.** In the second sub-theme there was a divergence in how participants described their entry into their first role in the community college. Some had experiences that they believed were significant factors that led them to seek this institutional type for work, and others felt as though they fell into their roles (similar to how they fell into the field
of higher education). There were six participants who had some exposure to the community college and cited those experiences as primary drivers that led them to seek work in a community college. Whereas the other three participants did not have such exposure. They felt that they did not consider the community college a potential professional fit for their first higher education position until they came across their position in the application process.

For those who had some exposure to the community college as an undergraduate student or while in their graduate program, they actively considered the community college as a potential institutional fit for their career. There were six participants from this study who intentionally sought out the community college for their career in student affairs. All six had some personal connection to the community college as an undergraduate or graduate student.

Ann was the only participant who had attended a community college herself. She had graduated from a community college prior to transferring to a four-year college, and this experience led her to focus on working at a community college when she completed her student affairs graduate program. While reflecting on her own community college experience, and the relation it had with her interest to enter the field of higher education, she shared:

I think [it] impacted my choice to then really be like, wait a second, student affairs professionals don't really seem to work at community colleges. And, so, more of those are needed. And I'm passionate about this. So maybe I can be one of those people. And so that kind is how that happened.

Rose offered another example of when a personal experience with a community college influenced a participant’s interest to work in this environment. Although she attended a four-year university, an indirect experience with a community college greatly influenced her interest to work in this specific environment.
My husband, strangely, was one of those students that I saw in my personal life not do well at [a large university] because of a lack of connection to resources, and he ended up at [a community college]. And I would just come to campus and study with him. And just seeing the way the faculty members would walk down the hall and see a student from one of their previous classes and just chat—just the community that I could feel even not being a student here, just being on campus and watching it happen. I just decided at some point, someday, I'm going to work there. And nine years later, here I am.

As another example, Beth had exposure to the community college while she was in her graduate program. She shared that, once she decided to pursue a graduate degree in higher education/student affairs, she believed she would end up working in a four-year institution and working in the functional areas of student involvement. While home for the summer between her first and second year of her graduate program, Beth was in search of a location for her required internship. Since she was geographically bound, the nearest higher education institutions were community colleges. Subsequently, she was able to secure internships at two regional community colleges. Although she originally thought these experiences would broaden her resume, and that she would still end up working in a four-year institution, these experiences actually created an interest for her to pursue this institutional type as a good professional fit for future positions.

The other three participants revealed that they did not initially consider the community college as an organizational fit until they initiated their job search process (and after they completed their graduate program). All three participants who did not initially consider the community college as an organization type for future work shared that they felt this was related to limited exposure to the community college in their graduate preparation program.
As an example, Hailey, an international student coordinator at a small urban community college, said:

I went to the same university for my bachelor's and master's. And then in the two years in between, I was interning at my university. So I pretty much only had one lens of how universities work and had these expectations. And so when I pictured what I'd be doing, it was based on those eight years with the international department at my university. So I kind of just didn't really have an imagination of anything beyond that. When I thought of myself and the future that was just naturally where my mind went. [It] was that I would be at four-year university working with students who were living on campus.

Amal had a similar experience. She did not choose a career in higher education until she had already gained significant experience while working in a K-12 school and then managing international education programs abroad. When discussing her entry into the community college as her first professional position in higher education/student affairs, she shared that the community college was not an institutional type that she initially considered:

I didn't necessarily see myself working at a community college. That wasn't what I was thinking. I was actually thinking more you know, a bigger four-year campus, research institution, or comprehensive institution. To be honest, community colleges were not on my radar.

**Experiencing limited community college exposure in graduate programs.** Although there were varying degrees of community college exposure in the personal and professional experiences among the participants in this study, there was a common sub-theme among most of the participants that there was limited exposure to the community college in their graduate
programs. When asked to consider how their current work aligns with their preparation, most of the participants shared that there were many congruencies and some distinct disconnections.

Concerning functional readiness, the participants revealed that they felt prepared for the positions they now occupy in their community college. However, nearly all of the participants described some gaps between their graduate experience and their current professional environment in the community college. For most, they described limited exposure to the community college in their graduate programs. Further, they felt as though there were distinctions in their current environment that were not addressed in their graduate programs. As an example, when Beth was reflecting on her graduate program classes against her two internships at a community college and her current role she said:

I would say the graduate programs are really focused at you working at a four year setting. There isn't anything about what it's going to be like working at a community college. Other than like learning theory that that could be applicable to various settings because student development theory, regardless of what institution you worked for, students are going through a very similar transitions.

This sentiment was expressed by others in this study as well. Rose had decided early on to focus on the community college setting in her graduate program. She found support from her advisor to focus on this institution type. Yet, she still felt some disconnect and frustration as to how her classes connected with her focus on the community college. She shared,

In almost all of my classes I was the only person focusing what I was doing on community colleges, which were sometimes difficult because the conversations that we were having were often not quite relevant to me. Or I could see how things were different and they would mention a resource that they have on their campuses, and that's
all well and good, except that I don't have that. Because community colleges just don't offer some of the same things. But also it was frustrating sometimes, and really good other times, because you could see that there were differences. But it would have been nice if there was more specific focus on the community college

I asked Rosa, who works in retention services, about how she felt her graduate program had prepared her to work in her current institutional setting, and she shared that she was glad she sought out a community college internship to broaden her experience base. Yet she still felt that her program was nearly singularly focused on the four-year experience. She felt this was due to some of the negative social stigma that exists against community colleges (i.e., less academic rigor and value compared to a four-year institution). She stated, “I absolutely do. I think it's more or less like a society thing.” She went on to add:

I think everyone was a lot more eager to do a four-year institution for whatever reason. I'm sure everyone has their own reasons. But I think I wanted to kind of find out what community college was about. I had several friends who attended community college and it kind of had that stigma of, well you know, you didn't really have the grades to do a four-year institution, so you ended up at a community college. And, you know, I'm embarrassed to say, that's what I thought it was, you know. But it's so much more than that, you know what I mean? And I think that a lot of graduate students are not even really sure or not even really aware of how much opportunity and just how much community colleges can benefit students in general. So I do think that graduate programs could give a lot more information about how community colleges could benefit students.

This particular sub-theme, a lack of exposure to the community college in graduate programs, is significantly related to and overlaps with another central theme in this study: how
the participants experienced the needs of the students they serve in the community college. This is explored in more depth in the section regarding theme three below.

The participants in this study had a strongly shared experience related to how they arrived at a career in higher education/student affairs. They did not initially seek out this field, and it seemed that most happened across this career path in indirect ways. In addition, most arrived at the decision to enter this field very late in their undergraduate experience and cited that their own involvement in campus life as undergraduate students and relationships with a student affairs professional were primary factors that led them to this work. Once enrolled in a higher education/student affairs preparation program, the next experience related to their career path was divided among the participants. For those who had some personal exposure to the community college prior to or in their graduate experience, they had a relatively strong awareness of this institutional type and an interest to eventually work in this setting.

However, participants who did not have any previous or significant exposure to the community college did not see themselves working in this environment. It was not until they were in their job search process did this become a consideration. Another prominent shared experience in this emergent theme was regarding how participants perceived the representation of the community college in their graduate program. Mostly they felt that there was some disconnect and limited exposure to the community college in their preparation programs.

**Theme Two: Adjusting to Unexpected Work Conditions**

This theme summarizes how participants characterized the work conditions as new student affairs professional in the community college. There were two sub-themes conveyed in this set of experiences. One, nearly all of the participants described their work environment as very fast paced and most claimed that they carried a significant workload. The second sub-theme
in this area suggested that the participants also found a positive outcome related to these work environment conditions. For the majority of the participants, they liked the diversity of their roles and found the experience of “wearing multiple hats” as enjoyable and suited to their work preferences.

The pace is fast and the workloads are considerable. This emergent theme was described through examples of working long hours, picking up additional roles and job responsibilities, and experiencing time frames where participants felt that they could not keep up with their work. Some participants shared concerns that they may reach a stage of burn out if this pace continued. As an example, Amal, who works at a large urban community college, conveyed:

It's also a lot of work and I can sometimes get inundated. And like last night, I left the office at like 9:45 p.m. And I definitely work more than 35 hours, which is what I'm technically being paid for per week. So it's just kind of like a one-man office.

Sophia, who works as a resident director and student life coordinator at an urban community college, shared a similar perspective,

The work environment is kind of all-encompassing and never-ending. This year has been a little bit better. But in particular, spring semester last year, when I didn't have a supervisor as a new professional, and was one of two people in the department, I was never able to get away from my work. Like, work was all I did. Work was all I thought about. And there's that constant worry about my students and if they are OK. This year's been a little bit better, but it's still… I'm working more hours than I really should. I don't have real outside interests aside from, like, my fiancé, who is fairly local. But I don't
have friends here because I don't have time to connect to the local community being on call as often as I am. And that's really challenging.

Elizabeth, who serves as an academic advisor and early alert coordinator added,

So when I was describing my job before, you could kind of tell I wear a couple of different hats under the advising umbrella. And that's true of me and all of my colleagues. We certainly advise students, but we all have these other responsibilities that are outside of... that are in least in some way related to that. So as far as the workflow. It's gotten better since I started. We've been able to hire staff and kind of balance it a bit. But there are times where it gets very hectic and you're balancing a lot of different things. You know, we want to meet with our students and get them in and help them. But you also need to submit the academic standing report or you need to outreach to the students who come up on the early alert system. So you're always kind of juggling that.

Ann, who works as a research specialist described her current position as a combination of two positions that were previously vacated, and then combined into her singular role. Subsequently, she feels as though she is always moving from one thing to the next and not really gaining a sense of accomplishment over her long-term goals and objectives. Ruth, who works in residence life, related similar experiences. She felt that some of the fast pace was a result of the “last minute” nature of community college students. Although she saw the pace diminish a bit once the academic year commenced, she felt as though there was always a pressing matter she needed to address.

“Never a dull moment.” Although participants shared that the work conditions were fast-paced and challenging, some indicated that there were also positive attributes related to their work environment as well. This is illustrated above when Elizabeth mentions that, “...I wear a
couple of different hats…” Several of the participants viewed a positive outcome of this busy environment as having diversity in their work functions and roles. This is illustrated by Ruth who said, “I think that's what I love about it. It's not just one office serving one purpose. I'm really utilizing so many different areas to serve students. And so I'm happy about that.”

Likewise, although Amal described working considerable hours, she also shared that she enjoyed the variety of her work:

The rewarding part of my work is that there's never really a dull moment. It's very versatile. You know I'm working with students on one side and then I'm also working and collaborating with a lot of faculty, which I think in the beginning I was really intimidated by that.

Beth also related a positive aspect of her work as the variety of functions she performed. Her primary function as an enrollment specialist was to recruit and enroll students from two large regional school districts. In addition, she positively described how she also served as a liaison to their new student orientation program, worked closely with their advising group, coordinated their engineering academic pathway program, and also ran a summer summit and leadership program for African American youth in their region.

Theme two describes how new community college professionals experience their work conditions. More than they had anticipated, all of the participants revealed that they experienced a significant workload and fast pace in their new work environment. Some participants shared concerns that this may have an adverse impact on their health and well-being. However, widespread concern about these conditions were not expressed among the participants. There was a shared excitement about their work, and they described their roles and their work generally in very positive terms. This seemed to outweighed any concerns they had about the unexpected
work conditions. Also, some participants even found positive attributes in the fast-paced work environment and their sizeable workloads. For many, their roles were very diverse and their professional functions were varied, and they appreciated being able to wear multiple hats and work in ways that was not wed to one specific role or functional area.

**Theme Three: The Needs of Community College Students Exceeded Initial Expectations**

All but one of the participants in this study related that the needs of community college students exceeded their initial expectations and that they found the needs of their students to be considerable and, at times, concerning. In most cases, participants conveyed that they did not anticipate needing to address the significant barriers that their students faced, and felt there was some disconnect between their graduate preparation and the student environment in which they now work. The participants said that issues related to food and housing insecurities, mental health issues, substance abuse, and academic underpreparedness were significant barriers for many of their students.

Amal was the only participant who did not share any surprise related to the considerable needs of her students and, more specifically, that these matters did not have any significant professional concern for her. This may seem even more surprising when considering that Amal works at an incredibly diverse institution that serves a broad range of underrepresented student populations in higher education, and a that a significant segment of the students who attend her institution are of low socioeconomic status. I believe that any surprise she would have regarding the needs of community college students is tempered by the fact that she had previously worked in a K-12 environment within the region within which her community college resides, and that she had also worked abroad with people who lived in third-world economic and social conditions. I am certain that she recognizes the magnitude of needs that her students experience.
on a daily basis. Yet her previous work in that region and her work abroad provided a broader perspective within which she did not regard her students’ needs with the same amount of surprise compared to the reactions of other participants.

There were two sub-themes in this area for the participants in this study. One, they viewed serving their students as both the greatest challenge and greatest reward of their work. Two, when reflecting on their readiness to work in the community college and their preparation experience, they felt there was a disconnect in being prepared to serve the student population in the community college. This second sub-theme shared considerable overlap with how the participants described the exposure they had of the community college in their graduate program (as discussed in the first theme above).

**Students are the greatest reward and the greatest challenge.** Although most participants said that they had experienced significant challenges in serving the needs of their community college students, all participants characterized working with their students as the greatest reward they had experienced in their roles. For most of the participants, serving their students was characterized as both their greatest professional challenge and reward. Sophia summed up the paradox of working with community college students as both a challenge and reward by stating:

I really, really love the students that I work with. Before I came here, I was working with very, very high achieving students and they, to generalize, don't need staff in quite the same way. They have a little bit more figured out. So just kind of being there and being real with these students is really rewarding. But that's also something that the flip side of is really challenging. I'm talking with students about some of their struggles with
substance use and addiction, with mental health, not being able to access resources, and not having the family support to access resources. Their challenges are really real.

Even those participants who had some familiarity with the community college prior to working in this environment were still surprised by the needs of community college students. Many of the participants did not feel that their student affairs graduate program readied them for the diversity and intensity of community college students’ needs. This was illustrated when Ruth, who had taken a class on the community college in her graduate program, said, “I think as far as prepared wise, I mean, I took a community college course in my higher education program. But I don't think I was prepared enough to know the diversity of needs of [community college] students.” Ann offered more specific examples as she reflected on her graduate program and the relation it has to the students she now serves:

I think it's just the frameworks [in my graduate program] tended to focus on, you know, a very traditional student. And we're not talking about traditional students, even if they're attending full time. Even if they're first time, full time, their experiences are so different. And so I think that in some ways the disorienting experiences that they're supposed to have, like, they've already happened. So we're just talking about a population coming in at a different place. And if you want to talk about basic needs, like they are hungry, they need a place to sleep. So, like, their basic needs need to be met in some ways before other things.

It was very heartening to hear the participants talk about this dynamic. When discussing their students, their voices lit up. Although they were often describing circumstances that were very challenging, their passion and commitment for their students and the mission of their institution was very evident.
Experiencing a gap in preparation. However ready participants were to fulfill their professional functions, nearly all of the participants in this study shared that they experienced a gap between their graduate preparation and the needs of the students they now serve. The participants had varying degrees of exposure to the community college in their own experiences and in their graduate preparation. Yet all but one of the participants relayed that they still felt underprepared to manage the needs of community college students.

Ann shared the best example of these gaps in preparation. A former community college student herself, Ann set out to use her graduate program to ready herself to work specifically in the community college. Yet she even expressed that she was not positioned as well as she had hoped to serve the community college student population. This is illustrated well by the following example:

I joked about it a lot with people from my cohort. My first position felt like, wow, I was so not prepared for this. My program was very theory based. And I think that the transition working at a community college in particular was really challenging because of all of the identities that our students carry. And working in an academic advising role, I felt like maybe I should have gone to a counseling program not an administration program. Because I don't know if I felt fully equipped for everything I was going to see and hear. And I think that... it was... there was just a tremendous amount of frustration on my behalf, kind of transitioning...going from this kind of like ivy league master’s program where it was very theoretical to kind of being on the firing line at a community college. And none of it working, kind of the way that, like you know, Tinto and Kolberg told me it was going to be.
Ruth relayed a similar concern about not truly being ready to address the needs of community college students. When discussing her observation of her student needs, she was reflecting on how her graduate program discussed the growing academic underpreparedness of students entering higher education. However, it did not fully prepare her for what that would look like in a community college setting. This was apparent when she offered some details about some of the students she now serves,

You know I heard the issues with transitional studies and students needing remedial courses. But I didn't see it so in front of me. Like, just to see an ACT score of a 9. Like it's a 9. I didn't know and didn't think students got that low and how to help them through that. And I think that was where I was unprepared for what I was going in for.

Hailey provided a similar reflection. When sharing about working with community college students and her graduate program readying her for this work, she said that they she drew more on her and her family’s experiences, rather than her graduate program. She felt her own personal experiences had stronger connections to her students than the frameworks shared in her graduate program. She conveyed:

I think it helped that I came from a background where my mom went to community college. I came from lower SES. I was a first generation college student. And so that background has helped me interact more with the population that were serving here, more so than my my degree program. In terms of understanding the issues and the concerns of students, I think my personal background has helped with that.

It is important to note that, although most participants relayed that they did not feel wholly prepared to meet the intense needs of community college students, their graduate programs prepared them to be successful in most aspects of their professional roles. Participants
shared that their graduate program situated them to be successful and proficient in their key functions and responsibilities. This is illustrated by Rose when she stated:

I don't think I could be here doing what I do without [my graduate degree]. I am consistently looking back on my notes from class, or remembering an assignment I did, or a conversation that we had in class. I have my textbooks in my office. The program that I was in was very much -- it was a hybrid program and it was very much designed around applying all the things that we're talking about in class to the institution you wanted to work for. And really applying things and thinking about how you could use it in your actual work. So I focused almost all of my class work on community colleges. Most of it specifically at this college and these students because I knew that this is where I wanted to be. And so much of it continues to be relevant. I think I could have gotten this job without that degree, but I don't think that it could have been as successful at it.

Theme three characterizes how the participants in this study described the students they serve, and the significant needs of this student population. All participants shared shock regarding the needs of their students and the sometimes staggering barriers experienced as they sought a degree in the community college. This experience was true even among participants who had some exposure to the community college prior to working in one. Even those with prior community college awareness were taken aback by the considerable needs of the students they now serve. Most of the participants felt this experience was in part due to the fact that the community college student perspective was absent from their graduate program. Yet, despite these challenging and difficult circumstances, they were all in agreement that serving the community college student population was the greatest reward of their work as well.
Theme Four: Where is the Student Affairs Perspective?

In the fourth theme, participants described how they viewed the perspective of student affairs in their current institution. All participants revealed that the lens of student affairs seemed inconsistent, if not missing entirely, from their community college when compared to the experiences they had in their preparation programs and their associated practicum experiences (e.g., assistantships, internships). This lack of student affairs perspective was described in two sub-themes. One, participants shared that there was a missing emphasis on intentionality in creating purposeful learning and program outcomes. Where this intentionality was central in their graduate program experience, it seemed to be lacking among the participants’ current community colleges. In the second sub-theme, participants conveyed that they felt that they were unique among their colleagues. When they considered their colleagues, not many had training or a degree in higher education student affairs.

“If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.” Another area where a lack of intentionality was observed was when participants talked about how their peers didn’t really want to drive change or challenge the status quo. The participants felt this was at odds with how student affairs professional roles were described, characterized, and developed in their graduate programs, and more importantly, how these roles were modeled for them during their practicum experiences. This also manifested when participants described the overarching attitudes held by their student affairs/student services units and among the attitudes of their colleagues.

Sophia provided an example regarding the lack of intentionality in her description of her work environment:

And I feel like the expectations, at least here, are very much keep swimming until something bad happens and then deal with it and keep going. It's really hard to be
proactive and up with everything that's happening elsewhere in the field. Because it's hard to take the time to do that and get ahead of things.

This sentiment was shared by others as well. When Elizabeth compared her community college experience to that of her graduate program she related that there was a lot of intentionality in developing holistic student development programs in her graduate program and assistantship. However, she didn’t seem that perspective nearly as pervasive in her current community college. Although she felt that some individuals held a strong student development viewpoint in her current institution, she observed that this viewpoint was not a collectively shared across her entire division. As another example, Hailey said that her colleagues reacted to her “like her head was in the clouds” when she brought up student development theories as a framework to address an issue they were facing.

Beth, who works as an enrollment specialist at a large suburban community college, thought of this lack of intentionality as an expression of keeping the status quo. She said that her colleagues responded to proposed changes with an attitude that “if it's not broken, don't fix it.” She went on to illustrate this in more detail:

That's not how we work in higher education. It's always continuous improvement. Every year, it's looking at what we did and improving on that. So sometimes that can become difficult working in an environment where a chunk of the people has been here for a long time and don't come from a similar background that you do. She found it frustrating that her interest to employ her student affairs training and perspective was often met with resistance by her colleagues and that they did not share her total quality improvement ethic.
A final way some of the participants described a lack of student affairs perspective and intentionality was through their transition experiences into their role as a new community college student affairs professional. Although the participants felt as though they entered into a welcoming environment and that they had support from their colleagues, they also felt that there was an overall lack of deliberate professional development, onboarding, and training at their institution. This was at odds with how these matters were addressed in their graduate program, and modeled by professionals they had interacted with during their training.

Hailey shared that she was surprised about the lack of follow up when she began her first position at the community college. She said, “No one came up to me and asked, like, how has it been? Or, how are you enjoying the position. That was kind of surprising.”

Sophia echoed this concern by sharing:

I was just kind of thrown in. I started two days before [resident advisor] training. And never really received any sort of formal training in any of our processes, procedures, or how anything at the college worked. I was never really kind of introduced around to people or told where things were. So it was very much kind of figure it out on your own.

As another example, Elizabeth said that her colleagues and supervisor were welcoming, yet there were no intentional institutional processes to bring her into the institution. In her case, since her supervisor was new as well, she said it was really up to her to figure things out.

However, it is important to note that a lack of intentional onboarding was not common experience of all participants. Three participants related that their institution provided a very positive and intentional onboarding experience. Ann and Rosa, who worked at the same institution, described that they were encouraged to join a professional development group for new employees. This group was focused on easing the transition of new employees into the
institution and readying them for future advancement opportunities. Ann and Rosa shared that this group had a positive impact on their entry into their community college, and they both shared that this made them feel valued and invested in. Amal has had a similar positive experience at her institution. She described several positive onboarding experiences, including training and mentorship, and felt this had a strong impact on her feeling welcomed and positioned to do strong work in her first role.

**Recognizing their colleagues’ lack of student affairs training.** Some participants believed that this lack of intentionality was a result of their colleagues, largely, did not receiving training and preparation in the field of student affairs. As an example, Ruth said:

> When I was reflecting on doing this interview, I looked around and even trying to think of people who might be eligible for this interview, like there's not a lot of people who have student affairs academic background with a master's in student affairs of some sort. There are some. But it's just not as popular at this college.

When asked to reflect on this matter, Beth provided a similar perspective when she shared that she felt that she lacked a source for professional advice and mentorship. She stated that “there is nobody here that I felt like could help me become the student affairs professional that I was trying to be.” Ann offered a similar observation:

> At least at the community colleges I've worked at, there are probably less than a handful of us who actually studied higher education. And so they're not coming at it from that intentional perspective as you find at a four-year school.

Ann went even further to state, aside from not having training in student affairs, many of her colleagues simply did not, “consider themselves student affairs professionals.” Elizabeth agreed that this lack of recognition was held by those in her institution as well. She felt that the
student affairs unit was seen as an “afterthought” and lacked the legitimacy of those in academic affairs. This disconnect of being viewed as student affairs professionals was also present in Rose’s experience. She described that her colleagues identified more as customer service representatives rather than as student affairs professionals. She said:

Like our people that help students register for classes are called customer relations specialists. So this idea of students as customers, I guess, would be the other school of thought. Some of us are very focused on the student, student development, and their goals. And then there's the student as a customer.

The fourth and final theme from this study describes how new community college student affairs professionals felt a disconnect between their student affairs training and how student affairs is practiced at the community college. For most of the participants, the student affairs viewpoint was inconsistent or missing completely at their community college. Overall, they described this disconnect as missing the intentional programmatic and learning outcomes found in their graduate preparation programs. They saw the culture of their institutions as not embodying this view, and they believe that it may be linked to the fact that very few colleagues in their units shared a student affairs preparation background.

**Relationship between Research Questions and Themes**

The primary research question for this study is: What are the lived experiences of new student affairs professionals as they become socialized into their first professional role in the community college? Through this research I sought to understand how this population experienced their professional socialization into their first student affairs role in a community college, and how they would describe their pathway of entry into this setting. Also, I sought to
understand how new student affairs professionals describe their decision-making process to work in a community college.

The themes from this research touch on many of the socialization factors germane to being a new professional in the field of student affairs. The participants shared insights into their decision-making processes to enter the field and factors that led to their decision to work in a community college. They also discussed their transition into their first role, and how they felt about their readiness and training to assume their new duties. Further, they conveyed their perspectives on their work conditions, which included attributes of the work environment, their relationship with their colleagues, and the experience of serving the student population in the community college. Specifics on how these themes overlap with what the literature has already revealed about new student affairs professional will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter V.

Conclusion

A review of literature on the preparation and transition of new student affairs professionals revealed that nearly all of the research on these matters is situated in the context of four-year colleges and universities. Mention of the community college as an organizational lens is nearly absent in this body of empirical research. Through a phenomenological research design, I sought to uncover and present the experiences of this professional segment. The major themes from this research revealed some of the factors that led this group of student affairs professionals to work in higher education/student affairs (and eventually in the community college), how they experienced their work conditions, the nature of the students they now serve, and how they viewed the culture of student affairs in the community college.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

In general, there is a considerable amount of research and literature regarding the preparation, socialization, and transition of new student affair professionals. However, there is an opportunity to learn more about a segment of these professionals who have not been well represented in this body of literature—those who begin their careers in a public community college (Hornak, Ozaki, & Lunceford, 2016; Latz, Ozaki, & Royer, 2016; Latz & Royer, 2014; Lunceford, 2014; Royer, Mulvihill, & Latz, 2016). In their book, *Handbook for Student Affairs in Community Colleges*, Tull, Kuk, and Dalpes (2015) indicate that there is very little written about the entry-level student affairs experience in the community college. As an effort to better understand the lived experiences of new student affairs professionals in the community college, this study examined the interview narratives of nine participants who completed a higher education/student affairs graduate program and began their career in the community college.

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological research design to reveal the professional lived experiences of new community college student affairs professionals to develop a better understanding of this group in the body of higher education literature. The primary research question in this study is: What are the lived experiences of new student affairs professionals as they become socialized into their first professional role in the community college? Secondary research questions focused on how these new professionals experienced their professional socialization into their first student affairs role in a community college, how they would describe their pathway of entry into this setting, and how they chose to work in this environment.
In this chapter, I will discuss the connections of the findings to the current literature, as well as offer recommendations regarding practice in the field of student affairs and future research opportunities. In addition, I will share the limitations that were found in this research design.

**Connection between Findings and Current Literature**

The participants’ interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes that emerged across all, or most, of their experiences. The four emergent themes from this study include a) how participants experienced their entry into the field of higher education and their first professional role in the community college, b) their initial work environment conditions, c) their experiences serving community college students, and d) how they identified the student affairs viewpoint in the community college setting.

**Literature Related to Theme One: Finding a Hidden Path into Higher Education and the Community College**

- The participants in this study related experiences that were consistent with what had been previously found in the research regarding entry into the field of higher education. All of the participants in this study revealed that their entry into the field of higher education was a latent decision. Similar to the findings by Mertz, Eckhorn, and Strayhorn (2012) and Taub and McEwen (2006), the participants in this study shared that their decision to enter the field of higher education came late in their undergraduate experience, and in some cases not until after they graduated. Like the previous research, positive student life experiences in their undergraduate programs and encouragement by a student affairs professional were the primary influences that led participants in this career direction. When asked to describe how they decided to enter the field of higher education/student affairs, the participants made comments such as
they “fell into” this career field. This is consistent with previous characterization that the field of higher education/student affairs seems to be a hidden profession (Mertz, Eckhorn, & Strayhorn, 2012; Taub & McEwen, 2006).

After participants shared how they initially began their exploration and subsequent entry into the field of higher education/student affairs, I asked them to tell me how they ended up in a community college for their first professional role in the field. This experience seemed divided among the participants in this study. Six of the participants revealed that they had some connection or experience with the community college while they were in their undergraduate or graduate programs. Participants who had some previous exposure to the community college indicated that it had been a factor for them to consider this institutional type as a good fit for their first full time position. Those in this group expressed a passion for working at the community college and that they actively sought to shape their graduate program experiences to help them prepare for work in this environment. Whereas, the other three participants revealed that they had no real previous exposure to the community college and that they had not considered working in this environment until they began their job search process. To this segment, the community college seemed to be a hidden professional path for their entry into the field of student affairs. They either conveyed that the community college was not on their radar or that they believed they would be working in a four-year environment upon graduation. Their understanding of their future roles in the field were set to be in a college or university setting, and it was somewhat of a surprise to them that they now worked in a community college. Based on these experiences, exposure to the community college seemed to have some bearing on their intentionality to seek out a position in this organizational type.
Although the participants had varying degrees of exposure to the community college prior to and in their graduate programs, they all shared that the community college perspective was missing or limited in their graduate program experiences. The findings in this area were consistent with what was previously found in the literature regarding graduate program exposure to the community college. According to Latz and Royer (2014), the availability of courses on the community college in graduate preparation programs among their sample were only offered as electives 17.56% of the time and as a required course 4.8% of the time. The participants in this study also observed, aside from there being a specific course on the community college or not, that the community college perspective was largely missing from their program experiences in general. One participant even said that, when she attempted to interject perspective regarding the community college within her graduate classes, she felt that she was being looked down upon by her peers.

Limited community college exposure in graduate programs is also consistent with Hornak, Ozaki and Lunceford’s (2016) examination of socialization experiences of community college student affairs professionals. They found that community college student affairs professionals, who had a graduate degree in the field, seemed prepared for the functional elements of their roles but were not intentionally prepared to work in the community college environment. This was a shared sentiment among most of the participants in this study. Where they felt functionally competent for their roles, there were elements of their new environment for which they did not feel they had adequate exposure to while in their graduate programs. This experience is also explored in the third theme of the study in which participants shared that they did not feel ready to meet considerable needs the of community college students.
Literature Related to Theme Two: Adjusting to Unexpected Work Conditions

The literature regarding the work conditions of community college student affairs professionals indicates that this environment is fast paced and carries a significant workload. Hirt (2006) and Helfgot (2005) primarily link the fast pace of the community college to their need to rapidly change and respond to the needs of their service region. In addition, Hirt (2006) characterized community college student affairs professionals as “producers” (p. 136). This was a result of two main factors. One, as previously mentioned, the community college has an inherently fast pace in order to respond to the needs of its region’s economic and service needs. Second, Hirt (2006) observed that community college student affairs professional reported a high level of bureaucracy in their institutions, which required significant levels of precision and accuracy in their work (adding to their workload).

The findings from this study were very consistent with the literature in this area. The participants shared that they found their work environments fast paced and that they carried numerous responsibilities and duties. They related both positive and negative outcomes related to this theme. From the negative perspective, some participants expressed a concern that these conditions could lead to burnout. This is connected to literature that has examined the relatively high attrition rates of student affairs professionals (Renn & Hodges, 2007), and that one of the commonly cited reasons for this attrition was the experience of burnout (Buchanan, 2012). On the positive side, many of the participants related that they enjoyed the multifaceted nature of their work and thrived in an environment in which they “wore multiple hats” and had responsibilities across functional areas.
In the third theme from this study, participants related two overarching experiences regarding their work with community college students. One, they viewed serving community college students as both the greatest reward of their work and as their greatest challenge. Two, they did not feel their graduate program wholly prepared them to work with this student population. The participants were shocked by the substantial needs that their students faced while trying to attend community college. They observed many of their students struggling with food and housing insecurities, mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic and family problems, lack of academic readiness, financial barriers, and work conflicts.

Although the barriers their students faced were considerable and the nature of helping students address these matters were daunting, the participants relayed that working with community college students was the most rewarding and satisfying aspect of their work. There was a sense among the participants that they felt as though they were doing important work and providing much needed services to their students. This affirms many of the findings and themes from Hirt’s (2006) study, which is documented Where You Work Matters. She found that community college student affairs professionals valued the relationships they formed with students as the most important aspect of their work, and that they were (more so than any other student affairs segment) keenly aligned with their institution’s mission. This mission alignment centered on student affairs professionals interest to help underserved and underrepresented populations gain access to higher education and find academic and career success. This alignment was present among the participants in this study as well.
However, when reflecting on their preparation programs, participants revealed that many of the elements they learned did not translate fully to the community college environment, specifically to the student populations they now served. They felt that the community college experience was missing from their graduate programs. More specifically, they shared that the breadth and depth of student needs within the community college was absent. This sentiment was also reflected in Lunceford, Ozaki, and Hornak’s (2013) study of community college professionals. Of those in their sample who had obtained a master’s degree in higher education/student affairs (72% of their sample), only 12.4% indicated that their program had done a good job of preparing them to work in the community college setting. It is important to note that, when discussing some of the disconnects between graduate program preparation and their current work, several participants in this study said that student development theory, in particular, did not translate fluidly into serving the community college student population. They felt that many of the theories were too narrow to apply to their students based on the diversity and breadth of life experiences present in the community college.

Finally, as noted in the previous section regarding work conditions, the experiences of serving this student population, and their considerable needs, seems to be another factor related to the significant workload and fast-paced work experienced by new community college student affairs professionals. The participants linked their work conditions to serving a student population who were very diverse in terms of their experiences and needs and had many barriers that made continuation of higher education very challenging. Hirt (2006) and Helfgot (2005) cited the community college’s need to respond quickly to the changing needs of their service region and the bureaucratic nature of this work environment as primary attributes that create a fast-paced work environment. Based on the experiences of those in this study, serving the
considerable needs of community college students is another factor that seems to contribute to these work conditions.

**Literature Related to Theme Four: Where is the Student Affairs Perspective?**

The fourth theme from this research describes how participants experienced the practice of student affairs in their current work environment. Most of the participants described a lack of student affairs perspective in their community college, and even in their student affairs/student services units. This manifested in a lack of intentionality among their colleagues and their division in terms of student development practices. Where the participants were taught in their graduate experiences to develop programs and services with specific programmatic and learning outcomes, participants in this study observed their work environment to be more responsive and less proactive, and in some cases, more customer-service oriented than student-development oriented. Through their graduate programs, participants were instilled with practices of continuous quality improvement. However, they frequently observed a lack of initiative at their current institution, and encountered attitudes that seemed committed to a status quo perspective (e.g., “this is how we’ve always done it”).

For several participants, this lack of student affairs perspective was experienced through their orientation into their first professional role, or more accurately, through a lack of intentional onboarding. Although they nearly all described meeting a positive network of colleagues who were both friendly and welcoming, many described being thrown into their role without much intentional orientation to their institutions and major functions. Three participants described being invited to participate in intentional experiences that supported their transition into the institution, while the other six participants felt that this aspect was lacking. They felt as though
this lack of orientation and onboarding was challenging and not what they anticipated based on their experiences in their graduate programs.

When I asked participants to share their thoughts on why they felt there was not a strong student affairs orientation or practice at their community college, most replied that they did not observe a significant amount of their colleagues having the same background and training as they did (i.e., a graduate degree in higher education/student affairs). The participants’ view in this study is supported by research conducted by Hornak, Ozaki, and Lunceford (2016) for which they examined the socialization experiences of community college student affairs professionals. In their study, they found that many of the entry- and mid-level professionals did not have a student affairs background or training and subsequently lacked a student affairs professional identity. Those without student affairs training did not use the same language or express the same norms as those with a higher education/student affairs background. Further, a student affairs orientation seemed to be lacking from the organizations as a whole as well (Hornak et al., 2016). For example, there was not much institutional support for professional development (outside of what was offered by the institution or in the region). National professional development was being utilized only by those with student affairs backgrounds and mostly by their own initiative. This was discussed by several participants in my research. They did not see professional development offered or supported at the same level as they observed in their graduate programs.

The findings from this theme provided the greatest surprise when compared to my own professional experiences. I work in an institution that I believe has a strongly established student affairs identity. This may likely be the result of consistent hiring requirements that seek to fill positions with graduates from higher education/student affairs programs, strong encouragement
from supervisors and colleagues to complete a graduate degree in the field (in addition to tuition reimbursement benefits), and a strong institutional commitment that supports participation in national professional development organizations and conferences.

**Recommendations for Future Practice**

Based on the experiences of the participants in this study, I believe there are two key recommendations for consideration to improve the socialization of new community college student affairs professionals. These include increasing community college exposure in higher education/student affairs graduate preparation programs, and elevating and increasing student affairs practice in community colleges. These may not readily appear novel or innovative in nature. In addition, I recognize that these recommendations cannot be achieved quickly or without considerable resources to fully address issues uncovered in this study.

However, I believe that these recommendations can be adopted at an individual level among higher education graduate programs and community college student affairs unit. Where proximity allows, there are great opportunities among higher education graduate programs and community college student affairs units to form mutually beneficial partnerships to increase the awareness of the community college in the training of new professionals and elevate the practice of student affairs in the community college. My two overarching recommendations are two sides of the same coin, as it would be equally beneficial for both graduate programs and community college student affairs units within the same region to improve these matters simultaneously. Also, these partnerships could lead to best practices in the areas of socialization for new community college professionals and could easily be shared, adopted, and replicated by other pairs of graduate programs and community colleges.
Increase Exposure to the Community College in Student Affairs Preparation Programs

All higher education/student affairs graduate students may benefit from a more deliberate and wider exposure to the community college in their preparation programs, especially where limited exposure is occurring. This exposure would allow more graduate students to fully consider and evaluate the community college as an institutional fit and better prepare those who go on to work in the community college to feel better prepared to enter this environment as a new professional. Also, for those who do not eventually work in a community college, this exposure can improve their understanding of this higher education institutional type, as well as broaden their awareness of student diversity and the expanse of student needs that they will experience in their future roles.

Increased exposure to the community college in graduate programs has the potential to improve the learning and professional development for all students, regardless if they eventually work in a community college or not. Royer, Mulvihill, and Latz (2016) examined a group of new student affairs professionals who took a course on the community college in their graduate program. All of the participants in this study went on to work at a four-year institution upon graduation, yet they all cited their participation in the community college course as having a positive impact on their current work. First, they felt as though the course helped them understand if a community college would be a good fit for their future career experiences. Second, they felt that the course alleviated negative stereotypes they held regarding this institution and that their awareness and understanding of the community college had expanded considerably. In addition, they found that an awareness of the diversity found in the community college student populations transferred into their work serving students in a four-year environment.
In addition, this increased exposure to the community college could serve as an added venue to explore issues of diversity, inclusion, and multicultural competency in graduate programs. As noted in Chapter II, concerns have been raised that there have been gaps in the preparation of higher education/student affairs professionals related to multicultural competency development. These concerns include gaps between the diversity within the racial composition of student affairs professionals compared to the students they serve (Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Kelly & Gayles, 2010; Olson, 2010; Pope & Mueller, 2005), graduates feeling as though they lacked adequate preparation to serve diverse student populations (Gayles & Kelly, 2007), lack of diversity training across the graduate program curriculum (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002), and a lack of faculty readiness to teach in the areas of diversity and multicultural competency (Pope & Mueller, 2005). Since the community college is the most diverse institution in the landscape of higher education (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014), exploration of this institutional type will allow graduate students to receive considerable exposure to the multiple identities that students carry within their effort to seek and complete a college degree.

In a study by Flowers and Howard-Hamilton (2002), participants shared several strategies to increase the visibility and engagement of topics such as diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism in student affairs graduate programs. These recommendations included weaving matters of diversity across the entire graduate curriculum (not just in specific classes), inviting guest speakers to address these issues as they are practiced in the field, and visiting institutions that serve diverse and underrepresented student populations. The community college provides an excellent venue to visit and understand more about underrepresented student populations and can be a source of guest speakers who can provide more insight into the experiences of working with diverse populations of students. It is likely that many higher
education/student affairs programs have taken steps to connect with community colleges in their regions. Yet, as the feedback presented by the participants suggest, engagement and exposure with community colleges could be improved, and partnerships between graduate programs and regional community colleges (where available) would be an excellent step in this direction.

**Increase Student Affairs Practice in the Community College**

As much as the participants’ experiences suggested a lack of community college exposure in their graduate program, they also raised concerns about the lack of student affairs practice in their current community college. Increased exposure to the community college in graduate programs should not fall solely on the shoulders of graduate program faculty alone. When proximity allows, community colleges should also reach out and develop partnerships with higher education/student affairs preparation programs in their regions. Invitations to preparation program faculty to visit a community college campus could initiate dialogue to generate internships, assistantships, and other practicum experiences that could benefit graduate programs and community colleges alike.

For example, as a former director of student life and orientation at a community college, I connected with the program director at a higher education/student affairs program to establish summer internship opportunities for our orientation program. What developed was a mutually beneficial experience that provided enthusiastic and skilled support for our orientation program and a meaningful experiential learning engagement for graduate students. Over several years of these internships, the graduate student participants shared that they had not considered the community college as a possible work environment for their career. In some cases, this internship experience led them to actively pursue positions in the community college upon
graduation, and they later revealed that the internship was a key experience that lent support in their interview process and contributed to their ability to land a job at the community college.

The participants in this study shared instances in which their socialization experiences during their transition into their first role were not positive. These issues surrounded a lack of intentional orientation and onboarding, a missing student affairs perspective in their new institution, and a lack of emphasis on professional development (especially related to national organizations). By partnering with a graduate program in their region, community colleges can elevate their institutional awareness of student affairs practice and move toward a stronger adoption of a student affairs identity. In addition, an increase of student affairs awareness in the community college can yield the added benefit of increasing pathways for future employees who have graduated from student affairs preparation programs, increase the adoption of student affairs practices that would improve student success in the community college, and develop momentum to support greater partnerships between higher education/student affairs programs, professional development organizations, and community colleges.

All of the participants in this study shared observations and experiences that there were limited student affairs awareness and practice in their community college. For most, this deficiency of student affairs perspective manifested through a lack of intentionality and continuous quality improvement efforts related to student services and programs. For another significant portion of the participants, they also cited a lack of intentional onboarding as another example of missing student affairs perspective and practice. They believed that their units should adopt a more deliberate learning orientation, intentionality in programmatic outcomes, and measures to ascertain effectiveness and continuously identify areas for improvement.
I would recommend that community colleges seek to expand the awareness of student affairs practice in their student affairs units, as well as engage in greater professional development (especially on the national level) and promote student affairs graduate program completion among their staff. As a professional who worked in higher education several years before enrolling in and completing my master’s degree in student affairs, I can share that this credential greatly improved my skills, knowledge set, and confidence to perform my duties. My degree completion vastly expanded my network of colleagues, introduced me to professional development organizations previously hidden to me, and elevated my awareness of student development theory, student learning outcomes, assessment practices, and an orientation for continuous improvement.

Concerning the socialization experiences of new professionals as they began their first job, community college should deliver a deliberate and positive onboarding program. Where not currently employed, this measure will ensure that new student affairs professionals feel welcomed, better positioned to navigate and understand the culture, policies, and processes of their new institution, and develop connections and networks that support success in their new roles. The participants in this study were divided in this area. Six of the participants shared that this was lacking and a concern. Whereas, three participants shared that they had a very positive onboarding experience, and that it positively shaped their entry into their institution.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Concerning future research opportunities, findings from this study suggest two primary areas for consideration. One would be a stronger understanding of how new professionals enter their field of student affairs in the community college. As feedback from the participants in this study indicate, they did not find many other colleagues in their institution who shared their path.
through a higher education student affairs graduate program into their current roles. This research could determine how these professionals make their way into their roles. A secondary research topic would be an examination of community college student affairs professionals’ levels of commitment and attrition. Attrition among new student affairs professionals has been an area of previous research and concern. A greater understanding of commitment and attrition level of new community college student affairs professionals could improve their training, recruitment, and retention efforts.

How student affairs professionals end up working in the community college is not well known. This study examined the experiences of those who, after finishing their undergraduate degree, enrolled in and completed a master’s degree in higher education student affairs and then began working in a community college. Yet, as many of the participants in this study shared, their experiences seemed to be unique among their peers. Further research could better help the field understand the pathways of entry into student affairs roles in community colleges and explore the training and professional development needs of this population to increase positive socialization and retention.

A second area for future research would be an inquiry into the commitment and attrition levels of community college student affairs professionals. In general, there is research that indicates that there are low commitment and high attrition levels among student affairs professionals (Buchanan, 2012; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Concerning the levels of commitment and attrition among student affairs professionals, Buchanan (2012) found that burnout was cited as one of the primary reasons that professionals left the field of student affairs. The participants in this study discussed factors, such as their heavy workloads and fast-paced work schedules, that could be a sign of future burnout and reasons (if chronic and unresolved) that they may choose to
leave the field. For some in this study, they already expressed some concerns with burnout, since they were not able to participate in many activities or relationships outside of their work obligations. It would be beneficial for community college hiring managers to understand the commitment levels and the attributes that shape community college student affairs professionals’ interest to either stay in or leave their positions.

**Modifications to Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework selected to guide in the design and analysis of this research was the Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Graduate Socialization Framework. This framework is built upon earlier models that depict the socialization experiences of students as they participate in a graduate program and transition into their first professional role. This model is specific to higher education graduate programs (across many disciplines and programs) and illustrates the process of professional role acquisition that occurs in graduate preparation programs and along new professionals’ transition into their first career role.

This framework details the experiences in which students engage in as they move from prospective student into and through their graduate program, and then into their first novice professional position for which they achieve role acquisition in their chosen field (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). The focus of this model is the graduate program experience, which includes the institutional culture and socialization processes specific to these programs (e.g., assistantships, practicum experiences, research, teaching, mentor programs). Surrounding the graduate program are relationships that both the program and students have with related professional communities, in addition to engagements that students have with their own personal communities and networks. This framework illustrates how all of these factors have an influence
on a student’s role acquisition and the development of their professional commitment and identity as they move into their career.

Based on the experiences of the participants from this study, there seems to be one element that could be added to this framework to more accurately depict the experiences of new community college student affairs professionals. This element is the context of the future work environment. This is strongly illustrated in Hirt’s research in *Where You Work Matters* (2006). After reviewing the experiences of hundreds of student affairs professionals across various institution types, she concludes that institutional mission and context has a direct relationship on work environment conditions, including pace, the nature of relationships with colleagues and students, institutional culture, and reward systems. The institutional mission and context also has a significant bearing on the professional fit between a new student affairs practitioner and their work institution. According to Hirt (2009), it is imperative that new student affairs professionals understand the nature of the institutional type and subsequent work environment in order to successfully evaluate the potential fit against their professional and personal needs, values, and goals.

Given the importance of institutional mission and context on future professionals’ experience and, specifically, the socialization experiences of new student affairs professionals, I have modified the Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Graduate Socialization Framework by adding an additional element to symbolize the impact that future institutional context has on the socialization of new community college student affairs professionals. This modification is represented in Figure 2 below. A grey oval, labeled *Institutional Context*, has been positioned over the latter portion of the graduate experience and covers the transition from graduate program into a new professional’s first role, to represent how an institution’s mission and
environment have a significant bearing on how the work is experienced by new student affairs professionals. This modification is supported by the experience of the participants in this study, as well as previous research by Hirt (2006). They all offered experiences and feedback about elements of their first work environment that had specific connections to their transition experience. Further, they shared that the context of working in the community college created dissonance between what they learned in their graduate preparation programs and how to best practice and apply knowledge and skill sets in their first role.

*Figure 2*: Modified Graduate Socialization Framework to Represent New Community College Student Affairs Socialization Experiences
Note: Adapted from Weidman, Twale, and Stein, 2001, p. 37, and Hirt, 2006
It is important to note that the Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Graduate Socialization Framework covers many different graduate program experiences. It is not specific to higher education/student affairs. This framework applies to graduate experiences across varying degrees (e.g., Ph.D., master’s degree, specialist degrees) and degree programs (e.g., medicine, law, social work). My modification should only be considered relevant to those who have similar experiences to the participants in higher education/student affairs programs and whose first professional experience is at a public community college.

**Limitations**

As with any research, there are limitations in this study. Price and Murnan (2004) described limitations as the biases inherent to a study that are not necessarily in the control of the researcher. In this study, one limitation centers on how I arrived at the pool of participants who agreed to be interviewed for this research. In this case, all of my participants were women. This result may have limited the perspective of those in their field as it did not include any male participants. This limitation may be due to several factors. One, women make up the majority of the members in the segment of new student affairs professionals (Forney, 1994; Hunter, 1992; Taub & McEwen, 2006). In addition, as a part of my snowball sampling methods, a colleague informed me that she posted my invitation to participate in a social media group for student affairs professionals who are mothers. I know two of my respondents, based on the details they shared, were referred to my study from that group. Finally, there is some research that suggest men are reticent to participate in research, especially online surveys similar to my participant questionnaire (Slauson-Blevins, 2016; Smith, 2008). These factors may have led to the limiting outcome that all of the participants in this research were women.
Another limitation may be related to how I defined the time frame of a new professional. A common definition of a new professional in the literature of higher education is an individual who has worked for less than five years in a full-time position within the field. I feel that some of the participants, whose time in their roles was brief (i.e., a year or less), did not have as much depth in their perspectives or experiences as those who had been in their roles for longer periods. Perhaps this time frame should have been adjusted to include only participants who have been in their roles longer periods of time, and who had an opportunity to develop more experiences related to the phenomena this study has sought to capture and understand.

**Researcher’s Reflection and Learning**

Through this study I have been afforded an opportunity to grow as a novice researcher and gain new insights into my practice as a student affairs professional. This experience has affirmed my interest to conduct research within my field. My goal is to continue investigating the socialization of new community college student affairs professionals. As noted in the section regarding recommendations for future research, I would like to investigate the profiles of new student affairs professionals in the community college, gain a better understanding their pathways into the field, and generate a stronger understanding of their professional development needs. These inquiries could lead to the establishment of best practices in recruitment and retention of this professional population.

In addition, this process has allowed me to reflect on my own practice as a student affairs professional. In particular, I have given consideration to my role as a hiring manager and supervisors of student affairs professionals. The outcomes of this research has provided insight into how these professionals experience their entry into a new institution and their first role, and pointed out where I can improve their onboarding and professional development experiences.
Finally, I see an opportunity to revisit the relationship that my institution has with a regional university that offers a graduate program in higher education student affairs. As I suggested in my recommendations for practice, this relationship could be cultivated into a more fully developed partnership, and we could explore mutually beneficial opportunities to increase their students’ exposure to the community college and provide greater professional development for our student affairs team members. Our work could generate examples of strong practices and partnerships that could be shared with the broader higher education community via articles and conference presentations.

Conclusion

Community colleges are important institutions that contribute significantly to the educational and training needs of their specific service regions. Collectively, community colleges also contribute significantly to the economic and social vitality of our country. Their role and place in the landscape of higher education is expansive and unique. Serving nearly half of all of the students enrolled in undergraduate programs, the community college and its open-door policies have allowed many student segments, who otherwise may not have had access to a college degree, to enter higher education and find success. They also serve student populations that face barriers not found in most other higher education (at least not in the concentration found in community colleges). Low socioeconomic status, lower levels of academic readiness, instances of housing and food insecurity, and other challenges are more prevalent in the community college compared to other higher education institutional types.

Vital to the success of students who enroll in the community college are passionate student affairs professionals who understand the needs of this student population. Community colleges need student affairs professionals who are able to design advising programs, campus life
initiatives, early alert systems, co-curricular engagements, and many other programs and services that will remove barriers and advance students’ abilities to earn a degree or credential. The participants in this study shared rich details and feedback related to being a new community college student affairs professionals. As such, this study provides greater insight into this professional population about which little has been previously documented within the body of higher education research. It has also revealed a disconnection between the participants’ preparation programs and their readiness to serve the community college student population, as well as how their perception of student affairs practice is performed considerably differently within this setting.

Fortunately, where proximity allows, forming new relationships between graduate preparation programs and community colleges can generate mutually beneficial partnerships to address these issues. These partnerships could improve the preparation of future student affairs professionals in graduate programs to better meet the needs of community college students and increase the awareness of best practices in student affairs to improve student success in the community college.
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Appendix A: Request to Advertise Study
Dear (insert name):

I am conducting dissertation research on the lived experiences of new community college student affairs professionals. I am reaching out to you to see if you can assist in advertising my study and helping me locate potential volunteers.

I am seeking new student affairs professionals who,

1. Have completed a master’s degree in higher education student affairs
2. Have worked 5 years or less in a full time student affairs position
3. And have secured a full-time student affairs position at a public community college after completing their graduate program, and are still at this institution or another community college (i.e., not working in a four-year institution).
4. Had not worked in a professional full time capacity in a community college prior to, or while, completing their master’s degree

The goal of my study is to examine and report on a student affairs professional segment that has not been well represented in the literature of higher education. This is a qualitative study. I will ask the volunteers to complete a brief questionnaire to see if they meet the sampling criteria listed above. If they agree to participate in this study, they will be asked to participate in a 60-minute interview and to review the transcript for accuracy and clarity. The estimated total time for participant involvement is 90 minutes.

Please consider using the attached flyer to promote this research study and invitation to participate. If you can, please share this via any email distribution you may have, social media accounts, websites, etc., as well as sharing directly with individuals who you think may meet the criteria to participate in this study.

Flyer attachment copy:

Are You a New Community College Student Affairs Professional?

Your perspective and story is needed! I am conducting research to better understand the experience of two-year college student affairs professionals.

I am seeking participants who,

- Have completed a master’s degree in higher education student affairs
- Have worked 5 years or less in a full time student affairs position
- And have secured a full-time student affairs position at a public community college after completing their graduate program, and are still at this institution or another community college (i.e., not working in a four-year institution).
If you meet these criteria and are interested in participating, please complete this short questionnaire (insert link).

If you meet the sampling criteria, you will then be asked to review and acknowledge the informed consent document. This document will detail all the corresponding risks and protection involved with this study. If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in an hour long interview. In addition, you will also be asked to review the transcript of the discussion for accuracy and clarity (approximately 30 minute of time).

About the researcher:
My name is Eric Mullen. I have worked in higher education for 20 years. Seventeen of these years have been at the community college. I am passionate about the community college experience, and hope that my research will inform future research and practice regarding student affairs administration in the community college. Your participation would help me reach this goal, and move me toward the completion of my PhD program.

If you have any questions about this study, or if you have suggestions where I can promote this call for volunteers, you may reach me at emullen74@gmail.com or 616-893-9147.
Appendix B: Invitation to Participate Communication
Dear (insert name):

I received your contact information from (insert name), our mutual colleague.

I am conducting dissertation research on the lived experiences of new community college student affairs professionals. I am reaching out to you to see if you would be interested in participating in my study and helping me locate potential volunteers.

I am seeking new student affairs professionals who,

1. Have completed a master’s degree in higher education student affairs
2. Have worked 5 years or less in a full time student affairs position
3. And have secured a full-time student affairs position at a public community college after completing their graduate program, and are still at this institution or another community college (i.e., not working in a four-year institution).
4. Had not worked in a professional full time capacity in a community college prior to, or while, completing their master’s degree

The goal of my study is to examine and report on a student affairs professional segment that has not been well represented in the literature of higher education. This is a qualitative study. I will ask the participants to complete a brief questionnaire to see if they meet the sampling criteria listed above.

If you agree to participate in this study, and meet the sampling criteria, you could be invited to participate in a 60-minute interview and to review the transcript for accuracy and clarity. The estimated total time for participant involvement is 90 minutes.

Please consider using the attached flyer to promote this research study and call for volunteers. If you can, please share this via any email distribution you may have, social media accounts, websites, etc., as well as sharing directly with individuals who you think may meet the criteria to participate in this study.

If you meet these criteria and are interested in participating, please complete this short questionnaire (insert link).

You will then be asked to review and acknowledge the informed consent document. This document will detail all the corresponding risks and protection involved with this study. If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in an hour long interview. In addition, you will also be asked to review the transcript of the discussion for accuracy and clarity (approximately 30 minute of time).

If you have any questions about this study, or if you have suggestions where else I can promote this invitation to participate, you may reach me at emullen74@gmail.com or 616-893-9147.
Appendix C: Participant Questionnaire
By submitting the information requested on this questionnaire you have consented to participate in this portion of the study. If you meet the criteria for the study and are selected for an interview, you will be asked to review and sign an informed consent document. If you have any questions about this study, or would like to discuss this matter in more detail, please feel free to contact me directly (Eric Mullen, 616-893-9147, emullen74@gmail.com).

This questionnaire is a precursor to our scheduled interview. The information requested below is preliminary in nature and will provide me with basic demographic information prior to our interview. As a reminder, this information is confidential.

1. Your name:
2. Confirmation that you have earned a master’s degree in a higher education student affairs program (yes or no):
3. If you answered yes, where did you earn your master’s degree?
4. Confirmation that you currently serve in a student affairs/student service role in a public community college (yes or no):
5. Confirmation that you have worked for less than five years, full time, in higher education student affairs (yes or no):
6. Did you work as a professional in a full time capacity prior to, or while, completing your master’s degree (yes or no):
7. Your race/ethnicity:
8. Your community college of employment:
9. Your role/position:
Appendix D: Informed Consent
Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership

Principal Investigator: Dr. Donna Talbot
Student Investigator: Eric Mullen
Title of Study: The Lived Experiences of New Community College Student Affairs Professionals

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “The Lived Experiences of New Community College Student Affairs Professionals”. This project will serve as Eric Mullen’s dissertation for the requirements of the Ph. D. in Educational Leadership. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely, and please ask any questions if you need more clarification. You may reach the student investigator, Eric Mullen, at 616-893-9147 or emullen74@gmail.com. Once you have reviewed this document and asked any questions that may be of interest, please sign and send this consent document to Eric Mullen at the email address provided above.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of new community college student affairs professionals. The study is being conducted to better understand this professional population’s transition from their graduate preparation program into their first role in a community college.

Who can participate in this study?
Participants who are qualified to participate in this study have graduated from a master’s higher education/student affairs program, are considered new professionals (i.e., no more than five years of full time work experience in the field of student affairs and higher education), and have begun their higher education career and are still working in a not-for-profit community college. Participants will be asked to self-verify this criterion via a pre-interview questionnaire.

Where will this study take place?
Individuals who respond to the invitation to participate will be asked to complete a questionnaire to verify their ability to meet the study’s criteria, and then will be invited to participate in an interview. It is preferred that the interview will be conducted in a face to face setting. However, if this is not possible a video conferencing solution will be utilized. In either scenario, a recording device will be used to capture the interview.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
The time commitment for this study will be no more than 1.5 hours (90 minutes) in total length. This will include an estimated 60 minutes for the interview, and up to 30 minutes to review the interview transcript and provide any feedback regarding accuracy and clarity of this transcript.
What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
You will be asked to complete a short questionnaire, that asks biographical and demographic information, such as your race/ethnicity, level of education, and student affairs work history. After receiving and reviewing the questionnaire, you may be invited to participate in one individual interview, approximately 60 minutes in length. The interview will be conducted or in person or via a video conferencing solution (such as GoToMeeting). During this interview, you will be asked questions about your experience as a new community college student affairs professional, your transition into this role, and your graduate preparation for this position. This interview will be transcribed. You will be asked to review the transcription and provide feedback on accuracy and clarity where needed.

What information is being measured during the study?
The information gathered in this study will be used as data in a qualitative research design. The information provided will be developed into narratives that will be reviewed for common themes among most or all participants.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
A risk associated with this research is a break of participant’s confidentiality. This risk will be minimized by the use of an alias name for all participants (of their choosing), as well as use of aliases for any other specific personally identifiable information provided by the participants (e.g., name of their current work institution, name of their graduate program institution). In addition, steps will be taken to secure and not transmit any of the records obtained in this study that could disclose participants’ involvement.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
You may benefit from this activity by sharing your experience as a new community college student affairs professional. New community college student affairs professionals are not well represented as a population in the research regarding higher education student affairs preparation. Upon completion, this research may provide a stronger understanding of this professional population, which may generate more research and influence practice for the preparation and support of this specific professional population.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
The costs associated with participating in this study it the time needed to complete the interview and review the corresponding transcript for clarity and accuracy (estimated 90 minutes total).

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
There is no compensation for this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
Maintaining the confidentiality of the interview subjects and their data is an important part of this study. Participant’s names, institution, or any other identifiable information will be published during this process. Participants will be asked to create their own pseudonyms that will be used in lieu of their name and institution. The researcher will maintain a key of participants and the corresponding pseudonyms. At the conclusion of the interview, the audio
recordings will be transcribed. Participants will be asked to review the transcript for accuracy and clarity. Once the transcripts have been checked by the participants and the student investigator, the audio files will be destroyed. At the conclusion of the dissertation process, all other data will be stored securely for three years at Western Michigan University and then destroyed.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**
Participants may end their participant in the study at any time for any reason. Participants will not be subject to any prejudice, penalty, or risks of any loss of service that he/she would otherwise have.

The investigators can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the student investigator, Eric Mullen at 616-893-9147 or emullen74@gmail.com. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document regarding the dissertation project, “The Lived Experiences of New Community College Student Affairs Professionals”. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

_____ I would like to participate in an interview for this study.

___________________________________
Participant’s Full Name (please print)

___________________________________
Participant’s signature Date
Appendix E: Communication to Respondents that Do Not Meet Criteria
Dear (insert name),

Thank you for expressing an interest in participating in my research regarding the lived experience of new student affairs professionals. Unfortunately, I am unable to invite you to participate at this time. After reviewing your participant questionnaire, you do not meet the sampling requirements for this study.

This decision relates to the narrow criteria requirements required of this study, and not concerning any other factors related to your professional experience.

I truly appreciate your interest in this work, and your willingness to give of your time to participate. If you feel my conclusion is in error, please let me know. You can reach me by email at emullen74@gmail.com or call me at 616-893-9147.

Best regards,

Eric Mullen
Appendix F: Communication to Respondents that Meet Criteria
Dear (insert name),

Thank you for your interest in participating in my qualitative study on the lived experience of new student affairs professionals in the community college. After review of your participant questionnaire, I have determined that you meet the sampling criteria for this study.

I am excited to initiate the next step in this process and schedule a time for an interview.

Please use the link I have provided below to review possible times, enter your name in the space provided, and indicate which times work for your schedule. Once submitted, I will reply with a confirmed meeting time.

(insert scheduling link)

In the event we can arrange a convenient face to face meeting, we can determine a mutually agreed upon meeting place. However, if this is not possible, we can arrange to meet via a video conferencing method (Google Hangouts, Skype, etc.) that works for both of us.

I look forward to meeting soon. Please be in touch if you have any questions in the meantime.

-Eric Mullen
emullen74@gmail.com
616-893-9147
Appendix G: Follow Up Communication to Respondents that Meet Study Criteria
Dear (insert name),

I have not heard back from you since the email I sent on (insert date). I know this is a busy time of the year for those who work in higher education. I wanted to check back and see if you are still interested in participating in my study?

If you are unable to participate, please let me know. Otherwise, please use the link I have provided below to review possible times, enter your name in the space provided, and indicate which times work for your schedule. I will reply with a confirmed meeting time once submitted.

(insert scheduling link)

In the event we can arrange a convenient face to face meeting, we can determine a mutually agreed upon meeting place. However, if this is not possible, we can arrange to meet via a video conferencing method (Google Hangouts, Skype, etc.) that works for both of us.

I look forward to meeting soon. Please be in touch if you have any questions in the meantime.

-Eric Mullen
emullen74@gmail.com
616-893-9147
Appendix H: Interview Protocol
Interview Protocol

Project: The Lived Experiences of New Community College Student Affairs Professionals

Time of Interview: ____________________________________________

Date of Interview: ____________________________________________

Location: _____________________________________________________

Participant: ___________________________________________________

Participant’s College: ___________________________________________

Opening to be read to participants:

Thank you for your agreeing to participate in this study. As I previously indicated, I will be recording the interview for transcription and analysis. You will also observe that I will be taking notes to highlight specific points of the conversation. At any time you can request that the recorder be paused.

Before we get started, can you please confirm that you have read and agree to the terms of the informed consent document. (pause and wait for verbal confirmation from participant)

The purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experience of new community college student affairs professionals. My goal is to document and share this experience, as it currently not well represented in higher education student affairs literature and research base.

I anticipate that interview should last around 60 minutes. Please let me know if you need me to repeat or clarify any questions.
1. Tell me about yourself, and how you got into student affairs?
Prompts:
• Attend for undergrad
• Where grew up
• Spare time
• Factors of influence
• When?
• People?
• Experiences?

2. Talk to me about your current position.
Prompts:
• Major functions and responsibilities
• Most fulfilling and most challenging aspects of work
• How does your current position compare what you thought you would be doing?

3. Describe your work environment?
Prompts:
• Pace
• Workload
• Professional relationships
• Rewards systems
• Perception versus reality

4. How did you decide to work in your current position?
Prompts:
• Job search and hiring process
• Personal and professional fit
• Personal experiences
• Mentors and/or professional influences

5. How has been your professional transition into this role? (additional prompts available below if needed)
Prompts:
• Institutional support
• Peer support
• Professional organizations
• Graduate preparation
• Mentors
• Success and challenges

6. How do you feel you have been prepared to work in the community college?
7. Concluding questions - Are there any other matters related to your experience as a new student affairs professional in the community college, that we have not touched upon, that you’d like to share?

Thank you for your time today. It has been great to hear your story. I really appreciate your sharing and candidness.

As I move into the next phase, I plan to use a pseudonym to reference your interview feedback in the narrative and data analysis process. What name would you like me to use in this part of the study?
Appendix I: Thank You Card to Participants
(Thank you sent to participants at conclusion of interview)

Dear (Insert name):

Thank you for taking time to participate in my research. I enjoyed learning about your experiences as a community college student affairs professional. I am eager to review the transcript from our conversation, develop the narrative, and share this with you to gain your feedback.

I anticipate having this narrative to you in four to five weeks. If it takes longer, I will be in touch with an update.

Again, thank you for taking time from your schedule to meet and share your experiences. I really enjoyed our conversation.

Best regards,
Eric Mullen
Appendix J: Request for Transcript Review
(Email sent with narrative asking participants for feedback)

Dear (Insert name):

I hope this finds you doing well. I am excited to share with you the transcript from our interview. You will find that document attached.

As a step to increase the accuracy of my research, please review this transcript and provide your feedback on the accuracy and clarity of the transcript. If there are any sections where you’d like to add detail or make any corrections, please respond and I will include your feedback in the data analysis process.

<leave this space to insert any areas where I may be seeking clarity on the transcript>

I look forward to hearing back from you, and please let me know if you have any questions regarding this matter. In the event I don’t hear back from you in seven days I will assume this is good, and move forward in the next phase of research process.

Best regards,
Eric Mullen
Appendix K: Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval
Date: September 7, 2017

To: Donna Talbot, Principal Investigator
  Eric Mullen, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 17-07-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “The Lived Experiences of New Community College Student Affairs Professionals” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: September 6, 2018