Female Senior Student Affairs Officers’ Experiences in Decision Making Across Their Careers

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FEMALE SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICERS’ EXPERIENCES IN DECISION MAKING ACROSS THEIR CAREERS

by

Somaia Hamza Mustafa

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology Western Michigan University December 2019

Doctoral Committee:

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DEDICATION

My dissertation is dedicated to my great parents and most lovely and supportive siblings.

Without their encouraging attitude and motivation I would never be who I am now.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All praises and thanks to Allah for His blessings in supporting me throughout my doctoral journey. When I started my PhD program I was confident I would complete it in a short period of time. However, it turned out that the pathway to my PhD program was a long journey. I was fortunate to come across many unanticipated yet welcomed opportunities that allowed me to reach the finish line. Earning my degree is a great gift that was given to me by those around me. I offer my special thanks to my advisor, committee members, family members, friends, and colleagues. I am fully thankful to my advisor, D. Nancy Mansberger, for her constant support throughout the completion of my PhD. I am incredibly appreciative to Dr. Mansberger’s eagerness to share her knowledge with me to succeed by providing countless strategies, outlines and information for finishing my dissertation. More importantly, I am truly grateful for her helping me through thick and thin. I appreciate her understanding, effort, and time. I also appreciate the support and encouragement of my committee members Dr. Lynn Nations Johnson, and Dr. Wanda Hadley. Thank you for your insights and recommendations for my research, which made me realize that what I do is more important than I ever could have anticipated. All of your insights and wisdom are highly appreciated.

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Somaia Hamza Mustafa
FEMALE SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICERS’ EXPERIENCES IN DECISION MAKING ACROSS THEIR CAREERS

Somaia Hamza Mustafa, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2019

This study explores the experiences of female Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) in decision-making across their careers in colleges and universities. This study focuses on female SSAOs who work in public and private institutions in the Midwest region of the United States. The experiences and perspectives of female SSAOs focused on the changes in decision-making styles while making small or large-scale decisions over time, the skillsets utilized, the challenges that they faced and the strategies that they employed. This study also explores female SSAOs’ experiences and perspectives regarding decision making when handling crises on campus.

The research design for this study is a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology. This study focuses on capturing the lived experience of 12 female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers. Data was collected through in-depth semi structured interviews. The sample in this study was 12 female SSAOs who work in higher education institutions in four states in the Midwest. The researcher utilized an inductive analysis to code the data and to generate themes and subthemes. The five themes that emerged from this data were female SSAOs experiences, the changes in decision-making across careers, the challenges faced, the strategies used in the process of decision making, and the experiences of handling crises on campus.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In higher education institutions there are many professionals who work in different units to help students on campus. One of the roles is the Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO). The SSAO is a senior administrator who leads all student support services at colleges and universities. SSAOs make important decisions on a daily basis to deal with work responsibilities. Within this role, SSAOs work with students. They promote diversity and develop an inclusive environment for students who are from diverse populations. SSAOs in US higher education institutions spend approximately 13% of their time in direct interactions with students and in encouraging inclusive participation (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). In addition, SSAOs deal with students’ problems and they are responsible for their safety by overseeing campus security practices (Roper & Whitt, 2016).

Women make up a significant portion of SSAOs in the United States. In 2014, women made up to 49% of SSAOs in 4-year public institutions (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). As female SSAOs handle student affairs division responsibilities, they play multiple roles on campus and face high outcome expectations in their work environment. They perform important administrative tasks such as developing strategic planning, managing budgets, in addition to interacting with students (Beavers, 2016).

Female SSAOs face several challenges in the workplace, the most important of which is dealing with crises on campus that affect a large number of students. Crises can include natural disasters; man-made crises, such as shootings and sexual misconduct; and facility crises, such as a fire or loss of electric power (Zdziarski, Dunkel, & Rollo, 2007).
In regard to female SSAOs’ experiences in the workplace, the literature suggests that some of them face additional challenges in their work such as gender bias. For instance, some female SSAOs are more likely to be perceived as weak and unable to make decisions independently (Halberg, 1987). In addition, other female SSAOs report they experience constantly increasing workloads because they feel they must do double the work of their male counterparts in order to be recognized as effective and valuable employees (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015).

Handling crises on campus requires skills and knowledge for effective decision-making as well as competent leadership skills to guide administrators through their own decisions. The additional challenges faced by female SSAOs within the work environment can make decision-making in the workplace (especially during times of crises) an even more difficult process.

Although some studies address the experiences of female SSAOs, my review of research found that there are very few pieces of literature about how they make decisions in the workplace. There is not enough literature about female SSAOs that discuss how they experience decision-making across their careers and specifically in times of crisis. This study investigated how female SSAOs describe and make meaning of their experiences of decision-making throughout their careers including when they handle crises. It also provided detailed descriptions of these women’s perspectives of the challenges in making decisions in the workplace and strategies for making decisions at higher education institutions. This study provided important information that may be used to add to female SSAOs’ success and their empowerment.
Background of the Problem

SSAOs in the Workplace

SSAOs at higher education institutions lead the division of student affairs and have multiple titles and administrative responsibilities. The common titles that are used for this position are Dean of Students, Vice President for Student Affairs, Director of Student Affairs, Vice President for Student Services, and Senior Student Affairs Officers (Coffey, 2010; Fisher, 2015; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). In these positions, SSAOs have several responsibilities regarding their college or university.

SSAO responsibilities on campus. SSAOs do not work alone in their institution and often deal with administrators who are above them, in the same level with them, and administrators who are below them. For example, SSAOs work with the president, provost, and board of trustees (Moneta, 2017). Likewise, they perform administrative tasks with other peer and middle-level administrators at the institution. They supervise their own staff’s performances as they work to serve and support students (Moneta, 2017). Further, SSAOs work to influence different constituents in their university or college, such as students, staff, faculty members, and counselors (Beavers, 2016).

SSAO responsibilities for students. Effective SSAOs strive to create an inclusive environment for students, promote diversity, and develop strategic plans based on the institutions’ mission and vision (Moneta, 2017; Roper & Whitt, 2016). These plans work to meet students’ needs which align with their development and success. Moreover, SSAOs often handle challenges that affect students and institutions. SSAOs handle financial responsibilities in the division of student affairs such as managing the budget and funding administrative projects (Fisher, 2015; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). Another
responsibility of the SSAOs is managing students’ problems, which can include addressing legal issues such as suicide, violence, or drug abuse on campus. Most SSAOs also have responsibilities in crisis management such as fire, hurricane, kidnapping, or murder (Catullo, 2008; Jackson, 2016).

**Decision-making during crises.** The individual who holds the position of SSAO deals with daily work tasks and as well as crises on campus (Jackson, 2016). In the handling of crises on campus, the ability to make effective decisions is crucial. Research tends to show that leaders in times of crisis face internal struggle regarding how and what they should do, and they experience doubt, fear, and stress (Jacobsen, 2010; Treadwell, 2017; Wang, 2008). During a crisis, most leaders tend to have difficulties when making decisions, such as dealing with institutional politics (Herdlein, Kretovics, Rossiter, & Sobczak, 2011; Jacobsen, 2010; Kaya, Aydin, & Ongun, 2016; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007), taking criticism for their decisions (Brennan & Stern, 2017; Garcia, 2015; Jacobsen, 2010; Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016), and communicating crises for others (Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005; Garcia, 2015; Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016).

**Female SSAOs in the Workplace**

Most studies indicated that men are more likely to be appointed as SSAOs; however, in recent years more women have been seeking this position. Although women continue to seek this position, the research that addresses the presence or experiences of female SSAOs in the workplace is limited. The literature about the experiences and responsibilities of women, especially female SSAOs, in the workplace tends to describe their current situation in higher education in general. In addition, the very limited research on female SSAOs focuses primarily on examination of their responsibilities and
roles in the workplace. The broader literature on women in higher education provides a larger focus on female leaders’ advancement to top leadership positions, how they find balance between their work and personal lives, and their mentorship experiences.

**Women in higher education.** The literature on women in higher education describes their experiences within the workplace and their preparation for a top leadership position within a college or university. Female leaders are seeking top positions by using several strategies such as developing networks and acquiring diverse experiences within an institution (Ballenger, 2010; Woollen, 2016). However, these women’s presence in leadership positions is still limited due to hidden obstacles that can block their access to these positions. As top positions can be challenging, some female leaders find that having mentors is an effective approach, which can help them perform well in their workplace. Yet, other female leaders find it challenging to develop strong mentoring relationships (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Hill & Wheat, 2017). Some female leaders have limited access to female mentors or they find themselves blocked from having access to male mentors (Ballenger, 2010; Hill & Wheat, 2017).

**Unique challenges faced by female SSAOs.** There are women in the role of SSAOs and they tend to handle the job responsibilities effectively (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). Likewise, their responsibilities have increased over time, with the majority of SSAOs finding themselves involved in upper level administrative tasks and becoming members of important inner circles within upper level administration more often than in the past (Collins, 2009). They participate in decision-making at the institutional level and work closely with the president of the university (Fisher, 2015; Moneta, 2017). However,
some female SSAOs face internal challenges due to an increased workload and hidden gender bias in the workplace (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015). Scholarly research shows that some female SSAO leaders struggle when they work with male administrators due to gender bias (Spurlock, 2009). For example, some female student affairs administrators report receiving limited support from male peers and having less autonomy in handling their work responsibilities (Ballenger, 2010; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015). Since the literature concludes that many women are still seeking top leadership positions within colleges and universities, it is important to consider the difficulty that many women find in balancing their personal and professional lives once they achieve the position of SSAOs (Collins, 2009; Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregoy, 2005; Spurlock, 2009).

The decision-making experiences of female SSAOs. A key to understanding the experiences of female SSAOs in making decisions across their careers includes analyzing their decision-making styles when they first come to the position, as well as their current decision-making styles and their decisions styles while handling crises on campus. What little literature we have on the decision-making of female leaders in higher education focuses on their decision-making styles (Halberg, 1987), the challenges that they face in the workplace, and strategies they use for making effective decisions. Research on female SSAOs indicates that they are more likely to focus on making high-quality decisions and on consulting with other administrators (Cejda, 2008; Halberg, 1987; Montague, 2011; Nakitende, 2012). While research indicates some female senior managers tend to be task-oriented and focused on what has to be done first, research also suggests that many demonstrate an adaptive decision making style (Christman & McClellan, 2008;
Montague, 2011). For instance, these female administrators adapt their leadership or decision-making style to suit what they believe is best-suited for managing a given situation.

**Challenges for women in the workplace.** Some women in higher education institutions, including female SSAOs, face challenges regarding decision-making in their work environment. These challenges can be due to gender issues or can be those that are more broadly experienced in the workplace, such as having to work with toxic individuals. One of the challenges that women can face in a college or university work environment is dealing with unhealthy relationships with others (Sabharwal, 2015). Rogers (2017) found that some women in academic work environments often deal with employees who run away from their obligations and avoid handling their mistakes. Likewise, many female SSAOs report they consult with others when they make decisions to solve problems. However, they can be perceived as weak and unable to make decisions independently when they implement this strategy (Halberg, 1987). Due to gender bias in the workplace, some female leaders struggle particularly when they work with male administrators. They can be excluded from making important decisions in their institutions (Ballenger, 2010; Collins, 2009; Sabharwal, 2015). Many women at upper-level administration positions face prejudice against the decisions they make because they are female. For example, some female leaders report they face increasing workloads because they perceive they must work harder to prove their competency, and they believe they receive unfair evaluation of their proficiency as administrators (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015).
Since female SSAOs can face challenges in decision-making during their normal daily tasks, they could benefit by learning of successful strategies used by others that may enable them to function well in their work environment. In order for female SSAOs to make effective decisions on a daily basis and during the time of crises they need to understand the dynamics of decision making clearly.

**Need for the Study**

Although there is some literature that discusses female SSAOs’ experiences in the workplace—including the decision-making aspects of the role—most available research about this topic and population tended to be highly outdated. Though it is possible that female SSAOs might have experiences similar to those of female administrators in other roles when it comes to decision-making during a crisis, literature that focuses on female SSAOs while making decisions in times of crises is limited. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature regarding the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers.

Moreover, the available research on SSAOs typically focuses on the roles, responsibilities, and experiences of SSAOs in general without talking about how those roles, responsibilities, and experiences can differ between female and male SSAOs. The literature also tends to focus on administrators in the midlevel positions rather than those at the upper level such as an SSAO. Although some studies address the experiences of female SSAOs, there are not enough studies focused on how they make decisions in the workplace, nor that discuss how they experience decision making across their careers and specifically during times of crises.
There is insufficient research regarding how female SSAOs experience decision-making across their careers. Most research is outdated or focuses on their advancement to top leadership positions (Halberg, 1987), their struggles due to gender bias, and increased responsibilities in the workplace (Fisher, 2015; Peterson, 2014). Limited research focuses on their leadership styles and decision-making experiences in the workplace (Cejda, 2008; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Guidry, 2007; Montague, 2011). Therefore, this study aims to provide a description of female SSAOs’ experiences in terms of decision-making within their role. The experiences of decision-making might help women who are inspired to seek this position know about what it takes to get there so they can make informed choices and maximize their success in this role. Understanding the decision-making experiences can also help female SSAOs manage the challenges they may face within the role. There are a variety of issues that female SSAOs at higher education institutions must deal with such as accountability, transparency, and poor performances. This study may reveal that many of inherent challenges in addressing these issues can be traced back to the unequal expectations for male and female administrators in upper level positions. Understanding decision-making challenges and strategies that women experience could assist institutions in addressing employee issues such as gender bias behaviors.

**Problem Statement**

The experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers at higher education institutions in the Midwest appear to be an unexplored phenomenon. After conducting a search on these women’s experiences across their careers, I found that this topic appears to be under researched. In order to refine my search about this topic, I
began my investigation by meeting with several student affairs professionals and four librarians. I met with some female Deans of Students and a faculty member who specializes in Gender and Women's Studies. They concluded that the decision-making experiences of female SSAOs across their careers, especially when handling crises, appears to be an understudied phenomenon. A critical review of the literature showed that there is a gap in research about female SSAOs’ experiences in making decisions across their careers. A fair amount of research has been done on women’s advancement to top positions and issues in the workplace due to gender bias (Ballenger, 2010; Biddix, Giddens, Darsey, Fricks, Tucker, & Robertson, 2012; Halberg, 1987; Woollen, 2016), which can be a challenge in making decisions. However, the literature that focuses on how female SSAOs make meaning of their experiences of decision-making across their careers has not been conducted.

Although women’s presence in top leadership positions at colleges and universities has been growing over the last years, it is still smaller than men’s presence within those positions (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). More female SSAOs are seeking these positions and handle multiple responsibilities that require making effective decisions. These women are also expected to deal with issues that occur on a daily basis along with larger ones effectively. Much of the current research concludes that some of these women are still facing gender discrimination (Ballenger, 2010), criticism over the decisions they make (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015), and difficulty finding balance between their personal and professional lives (Guthrie, Woods, Corinne, & Gregoy, 2005). These challenges may put them under pressure and complicate their performances including the process of decision-making (Spurlock, 2009). There is a need
for this study to provide strategies for decision-making that might be beneficial for these women and could add to their competencies.

**Purpose Statement**

Based on the literature, it is known that leaders in the workplace have the option to make decisions either individually or in a collaborative manner. With increased presence of women in administrative positions in higher education institutions, some of them become SSAOs (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014); they are also expected to handle daily issues including crises on campus. The research also shows that female SSAOs make effective decisions in handling work responsibilities. Some of them tend to have a collaborative decision-making style where they consult with experts to solve problems. However, some female SSAOs face gender bias behaviors and other challenges which make decision-making in the workplace a difficult process (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015). Female administrators might have multiple perspectives about decision-making strategies such as making effective decisions quickly and consulting with experts.

Limited research, however, focuses on the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers at higher education institutions in the Midwest. The literature about how female SSAOs make decisions when they first were appointed to this position is limited. It is not clear in the research if they were making decisions individually or in a collaborative manner. The literature concluded that some female SSAOs make decisions in a collaborative manner (Halberg, 1987), but it is not clear if this decision making style describes their old or current style. The research also is limited on how female SSAOs experience decision making in handling crises on campus. It
focuses on female administrators’ struggle in decision-making due to gender bias such as being excluded from making important decisions involving the welfare of the institution or having increasing workloads (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Wilson, 2005; Ballenger, 2010; Spurlock, 2009). In addition, there is insufficient research that focuses on these women’s perspectives on strategies of decision-making in the workplace. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of 12 female SSAOs who work at higher education institutions in the Midwest in making decisions across their careers and during times of crisis in order to understand what challenges they face and the strategies that they use to meet those challenges.

**Research Questions**

The overarching question was: what are the experiences of female SSAOs who work in higher education institutions in the Midwest in regards to making decisions across their careers? The sub questions are:

1. How do female SSAOs describe the changes in decision-making experiences across their careers?
2. How do they describe the challenges of decision making in the workplace?
3. How do they describe different strategies of decision making in the workplace?
4. If they believe they have handled a crisis, how do they describe their decision making process while handling a crisis on campus?

**Significance of the Study**

Using a qualitative design to collect and analyze data and involving female SSAOs in this study by sharing their stories can help in understanding the experiences of these women in making decisions across their careers. Exploring the experiences of
female SSAOs could assist other women to better understand how the ability to make effective decisions can affect their success in this position. This study may influence prospective SSAOs to make a more informed decision in regard to seeking this position or not. Understanding the challenges that female SSAOs face in the work environment could also assist other current female SSAOs in knowing what to expect in this position, and how to face their own challenges within the position. Further, understanding strategies that these women use in making decisions can assist women who seek this position to better prepare themselves to handle the responsibilities of the job. These strategies might be used as recommendations for professional development or training for prospective female SSAOs.

Some higher education institutions nowadays suffer from a decreased quality in their overall function. Colleges and universities can face issues that threaten their survival, such as unstable students’ enrollment and retention (Roper & Whitt, 2016). These institutions can also face administration issues such as budget management, students’ success, and stereotypes of academic quality (Eaton, 2017). In addition, according to Roper and Whitt (2016), some student affairs administrators are subject to institutional scrutiny due to administrative issues that hinder their ability to meet institutional demands. The cause of these issues might lie in workplace bullying, which can include gender discrimination among employees such as excluding women from making important decisions. Exploring the challenges that these women face can reveal some issues that institutions experience. For example, the results of this study can reveal that an institution might have a hostile culture among employees. This study might assist
institutions in addressing workplace issues that female administrators face, and improve employees’ performances.

**Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework that guides this study was comprised of two theories: behavioral leadership theory and situational leadership theory. They served as the major lenses for this study. Behavioral leadership theory was the first lens of this study. This leadership theory focuses not only on leaders’ inner qualities, but also on their actions. This theory also focuses on what leaders do, how they behave, and their accomplishments (Katz, 1974). Leadership actions are described as having skills. Skills are defined as a leader’s ability to do certain tasks or their capability to perform intellectual processes in handling work duties (Peterson & Van Fleet, 2004). When leaders have skills, it means they have a specific knowledge base that they can readily access. Having skills also means that they are able to act on this information and perform cognitive tasks to solve a certain problem (Peterson & Van Fleet, 2004). This theory has three components that identify leaders’ behaviors, which are task-oriented behavior, relationship-oriented behavior, and participative leadership (Yukl, 1989).

Knowledge of these three leadership actions can help individuals differentiate between effective leaders and ineffective leaders. The behavior of task-oriented leaders is to develop plans and work schedules. It also includes guiding subordinates to set realistic performance goals, organize their activities, and provide needed materials (Yukl, 1989). Relationship-oriented behaviors include the idea that effective leaders treat subordinates in a supportive way and are considerate of their needs. This support of others is linked with the behaviors of effective leaders. It includes building trust with subordinates,
providing professional development, and promoting their autonomy. Finally, participative leadership actions are focused on the idea that leaders supervise subordinates in groups, not individually. It also includes engaging them in the process of decision-making. Leaders form group meetings with subordinates, facilitate the discussion, keep it constructive, and guide it toward making solutions for problems (Yukl, 1989).

The second theory that shaped the framework of this study was situational leadership. Situational leadership theory is an adaptive leading style that can be modified based on the team members’ skills and the condition of the work environment. This theory emphasizes the idea that leaders can modify their leadership and decision making styles to fit the organization’s situation to meet its requirements (Blanchard & Hersey, 1988). They need to be able to switch from one decision-making style to another one in order to cope with changing conditions in the work environment and among the team members. Leaders must be able to identify the competency level of their team members and critically diagnose their organization’s situational needs and demands. Leaders choose the most appropriate decision making styles for a given situation to deal with a problem. They engage their team in the process of decision-making based on their competency level and what they can do.

The situational leadership theory has four component behaviors that leaders can choose from. According to Blanchard and Hersey (1988), the four component behaviors of situational leadership are telling, selling, participating, and delegating. The first component is telling, which occurs when leaders make decisions alone and then inform the participants about it. Team members in this stage often have low proficiency, so leaders develop plans and goals and expect others to follow them. The second component
is selling, which is when leaders make decisions, but they still discuss them with others. This strategy allows the leaders to take others’ input and suggestions into consideration. Participating happens when leaders and team members engage in the process of decision-making together. This allows the leaders to support the decisions that their team members suggested. The last component is delegating. In this leading style, the team members have a high level of expertise, so leaders sometimes delegate decision-making responsibilities for them and provide low levels of guidance.

One of the assumptions of behavioral theory is that leaders are in charge of the entire decision making process. They collect information, develop plans, and expect others to accept them. Another assumption is that leaders consult with others, form meetings, and guide team members through the process of decision-making. Based on the situational theory, there is an assumption that leaders change their decision-making styles based on their team members’ competencies and institutional situations. Situational theory also assumes that leaders delegate decision-making responsibilities when the team members have high competency.

For this study, it was assumed that female SSAOs change their decision-making styles across their careers. In the beginning of their career, female SSAOs tend to make decisions individually, however, as their responsibilities change over the years, they begin making decisions in a collaborative manner (Roper & Whitt, 2016; Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). In addition, I assumed that female SSAOs change their decision-making styles based on their team members’ competencies and the needs of a situation (Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Since female SSAOs report to
the university presidents, I assumed that some of these women choose decision-making styles that are suitable for communicating with every president (Spurlock, 2009).

I further assumed that female SSAOs experience challenges as well as develop strategies while making decisions within this role. Regarding the challenges that female SSAOs might face while making decisions, I assumed that one of the challenges is the inability to delegate decision-making responsibilities to other employees. This is due to the lack of support from male peers, or not being taken seriously (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015). On the other hand, I assumed that the strategies that female SSAOs use in the workplace include collecting information, developing plans, and encouraging employees to follow their decisions (Kerrigan & Jenkins, 2013). Further, another strategy that I assumed female SSAOs would use, was to help employees develop professional skills and make high quality decisions (Cejda, 2008; Halberg, 1987; Montague, 2011; Nakitende, 2012).

In terms of handling crises, I assumed that female SSAOs are in charge of the entire decision making process, which is especially challenging during these crises. According to Garcia (2015), leaders at the upper level of administration are often recognized as public figures, which operate under the pressure of the public eye. Moreover, I assumed that when female SSAOs handle crises on campus, they consult with administrators or experts, form meetings, and guide team members through the process of decision-making (Jacobsen, 2010; Maccoy et al. 2013). Since I presented the assumptions of my study, I also presented the conceptual framework.
The conceptual framework served as a road map that guided the description of the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making throughout their careers. This framework included a synthesis of the current literature that explained this phenomenon and previous researchers utilized it effectively (Schuemann, 2014). My literature review worked to define the boundaries of my study. This literature review focused first on presenting the research that has been done about female SSAOs independently. It also focused deeply on what is known about decision-making in the workplace. This literature review included a discussion on female SSAOs, especially female leaders, regarding their experiences in higher education institutions. These experiences addressed the challenges, as well as the strategies that these female administrators used while making decisions. Furthermore, the research discussed decision-making within the workplace in general and in colleges and universities. The literature on decision-making eventually addressed decision-making during a crisis. It further discussed the types of crises on campus and the experiences of female leaders in making decisions while dealing with crises. The literature ultimately explained the challenges as well as the beneficial strategies that leaders use in the process of decision making during a crisis. The diagram in *Figure 1* explains the initial conceptual framework.
Figure 1. Initial Conceptual Framework

The existing literature and theories on female administrators and decision-making served as a foundation for understating the phenomenon regarding female SSAOs’ experiences. I utilized behavioral leadership theory and situational leadership theory as major lenses to frame this study. I focused on female SSAOs’ actions, how they make decisions, and how they adjust their decision-making styles while handling work responsibilities. Through utilizing the phenomenological approach I explored the changes in the experiences of female SSAOs over their time in this position. The current literature helped in framing what female SSAOs described as meaning regarding their experiences. The findings were compared and contrasted to the current literature and helped interpret how female SSAOs experience decision-making. The diagram in Figure 2 explains the final conceptual framework.
In the design of this study, I used a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the essences of individuals’ experiences. Phenomenology is used to understand the common meaning of individuals’ lived experiences from their perspectives, and then to make meaning from analyzing these points of view (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). It is appropriate to use a phenomenological study when researchers try to gather the common meaning of the lived experiences of individuals, and when there are limited studies that address that specific problem (Creswell, 2013). After reviewing the literature, I found that studies focus on female SSAOs’ decision making in the workplace in general and their struggle due to gender bias. There is a lack of availability of research that addresses how these women experience decision-making across their careers.
This study took place at higher education institutions in the Midwest. The population was made up of women who are identified by their institution as an SSAO. I chose women who have been in this role from 3 years up to 25 years. Sampling techniques included employing a gatekeeper technique and my own professional contact to assist in recruiting participants. My initial professional contact was the gatekeeper, which was a female SSAO who has worked in a Midwestern university for almost 16 years. As she has been in this position for this long, she has experiences in this field and has developed important relationships. Sampling techniques also included snowballing and criterion techniques. I determined participates who met my study’s criteria, and after I interviewed each participant I asked her to refer me to another individual who met the same criteria (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Therefore, through her networks, she connected me with more informed participants who were a good fit to my study. The sample size was 12 participants, and I also utilized my own professional contact and contacted the female SSAO who was the second initial contact to introduce me to more informed participants. I collected the data through conducting an in-depth semi-structured interview with each participant. I conducted the interview face-to-face when possible or through Skype or phone.

Chapter I Summary

Making effective decisions in the work setting in colleges and universities has become a mandatory practice for administrators. These institutions are subject to many changes, such as small issues that occur generally, and large ones such as students’ crises on campus. SSAOs are one of the administrators who handle work responsibilities, and they can be either men or women. Female SSAOs continue to exist in this leadership
position, and limited research addresses their current presence and decision-making experiences in the workplace. In chapter II, the researcher has reviewed the current literature on this population and women administrators, which focused on decision-making styles in general, challenges that they face during this process, and strategies that they use to make proper decisions. Other research addresses women statuses in higher education, decision making in the work settings, and decision making in the times of crises.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The decision-making experiences of female Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) across their careers and while handling crises appears to be an unexplored phenomenon. Female SSAOs have an increased presence in higher education institutions. However, research focuses mainly on their advancement to the top-level position of student affairs divisions or on other issues such as gender bias. As the colleges and universities change over time, they are subject to dealing with severe issues, such as institutional crises. Students can also be affected by many unexpected incidents, and SSAOs are primarily responsible for students’ learning and safety. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry study was to explore the experiences of 12 female SSAOs who work at higher education institutions in the Midwest in making decisions across their careers and during times of crisis in order to understand what challenges they face and the strategies that they use to meet those challenges. The overarching question is: what are the experiences of female SSAOs who work in higher education institutions in the Midwest in regards to making decisions across their careers? The sub questions are:

1. How do female SSAOs describe the changes in decision-making experiences across their careers?
2. How do they describe the challenges of decision-making in the workplace?
3. How do they describe different strategies of decision-making in the workplace?
4. If they believe they have handled a crisis, how do they describe their decision-making process while handling a crisis on campus?
This chapter provides an overview of the literature that discusses the experiences of women in higher education settings including those of female SSAOs. For example, women still have a lower presence in top leadership positions, they face difficulty finding balance between their personal and professional lives, and they use professional development and mentoring. This section also discusses the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making and their responsibilities in work settings. The literature further discusses decision-making in the workplace and dealing with institutional crises. The literature includes a discussion of crises types, the challenges that leaders face while handling extreme events, and the strategies that they use during difficult times. This current literature is very limited about these women’s experiences and focuses more on the position of SSAOs. Ultimately this section addresses the empirical studies about the challenges and strategies that female administrators experience in the workplace.

**SSAOs’ Responsibilities in the Workplace**

The responsibilities of Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) in the workplace include a description of the role of SSAO and SSAOs’ duties. The literature focuses on what is known about SSAOs in higher education institutions. This literature begins with describing the role of SSAOs, which discusses who they are, their titles, and the scope of their position. It follows by describing SSAOs’ responsibilities, which discusses the obligations of SSAOs in the workplace such as financial duties and security and/or crisis management. This literature also focuses on SSAOs’ responsibilities for students such as promoting diversity and SSAOs’ protection duties. This existing literature will be compared to my study’s findings in regard to the description of the experiences of female SSAOs’ in the workplace.
Description of the Role

**Defining SSAO’s role.** A senior student affairs officer (SSAO) is a key member in the administration of student affairs. Fisher (2015) in his study of developing a profile of the Chief Student Affairs Officers’ (CSAOs) demographics and characteristics examined the responsibilities, functional areas, and leadership styles of CSAOs at 23 campuses. He found that the CSAOs are in charge of the division of student affairs at CSU. CSAOs also manage the personnel, report to the president, and assist a large number of students such as 19,650 students. This finding is similar to Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) who found that 72% of CSAOs in higher education institutions in the United States are reporting directly to the president or chancellor of their university. In addition, 16% of CSAOs report to the chief academic officer or provost. Similarly, Moneta (2017) in his book, *Enacting Intersectionality in Student Affairs: New Directions for Student Services*, examined how SSAOs integrate intersectionality into preforming their responsibilities in the workplace. He suggested that SSAOs are supposed to practice vertical and horizontal administration. SSAOs interact with various stakeholders and personnel, so they lead and influence students, faculty members, staff, and peer administrators. SSAOs also work with upper level leaders such as presidents, provosts, and members of boards of trustees.

**Large scope of duties.** SSAOs perform other responsibilities within their role. Roper and Whitt (2016) in their book, *Angst and Hope: Current Issues in Student Affairs Leadership* examined leadership experiences of SSAOs as well as the challenges and the opportunities within their role in private and public colleges and universities across the United States. They found that some external organizations are in charge of institutions,
and SSAOs should take their legislation into consideration. For example, when state and federal government enact regulations regarding an institution, SSAOs need to follow these regulations while developing new polices or initiating practices. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) who found that CSAOs have responsibilities in developing strategic planning, supervising employees, and interacting with external communities. This finding is also similar to the findings acquired by Moneta (2017) who found that student affairs administrators create strategic plans, which include making decisions to set institution’s priorities and allocate its resources. This planning should align with the institution’s mission and meet stakeholders’ needs.

Furthermore, in a related study, Fisher (2015) in his study of developing a profile of the CSAOs’ demographics and characteristics, examined the responsibilities, functional areas, and leadership styles of CSAOs at 23 campuses, found that 100% of CSAOs at CSU supervise functional areas in the division of student affairs that are related to career preparations and counseling. They also oversee functional units that deal with students’ legal affairs or issues and their activities on campus.

**SSAOs’ Responsibilities on Campus**

**Financial roles.** Most SSAOs are expected to handle financial responsibilities. Fisher (2015) in his study of developing a profile of the CSAOs’ demographics and characteristics, examined the responsibilities, functional areas, and leadership styles of CSAOs at 23 campuses, found that the role of SSAOs requires them to participate in managing campus fiscal budgets. Similarly, Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) in their study of developing a profile about the current situation of CSAOs at higher education institutions in the United States examined the demographics, roles, and functional areas of CSAOs,
as well as information about them such as challenges and issues they face. They concluded that most CSAOs reported facing instability in financial resources, so they deal with issues such as reducing funds or fluctuating budgets. CSAOs are also involved in financial activities such as fundraising. Moreover, Moneta (2017) in his book, Enacting Intersectionality in Student Affairs: New Directions for Student Services, examined how SSAOs integrate intersectionality into preforming their responsibilities in the workplace. He found that SSAOs aim to create intersectional practices to promote students’ diversity and inclusion through developing new inclusive projects. He also found that, in order to fund student affairs projects, SSAOs need to have financial skills and abilities to develop investments.

**Crisis management.** Some SSAOs have responsibilities in managing crises in their institutions. Catullo (2008) in his study of the status of crisis management preparedness as perceived by universities’ Chief of Student Affairs Officers (CSAOs) examined how CSAOs perceive crisis management in their four-year institutions. He found that most SSAOs at four-year institutions are responsible for responding to crises on their campus. They are also in charge of coordinating the effort of responding to crises. Other administrators in crisis management teams are also involved in handling crises and they report to the administrator who leads the coordinating effort. Similarly, Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) in their study of developing a profile about the current situation of CSAOs at higher education institutions in the United States examined the demographics, roles, and functional areas of CSAOs, as well as information about them such as challenges and issues they face. They found that SSAOs handle crises in their institution and allocate 12% of their time to crisis management. Moreover, Jackson
(2016) in his study of the Deans of Students’ responsibilities in campus crisis management examined the role of Dean of Students in handling crises on campus in higher education in the state of Georgia. He found that some deans of students at four-year public institutions in the state of Georgia are in charge of managing crises on campus. The deans work to prevent crises from happening through addressing students’ problems as soon as they appear. In addition, Roper and Whitt (2016) in their book, Angst and Hope: Current Issues in Student Affairs Leadership examined leadership experiences of SSAOs as well as the challenges and the opportunities within their role in private and public colleges and universities across the United States. They concluded that SSAOs respond to individuals in the campus community through social media when a tragedy occurs.

SSAO Responsibilities for Students

SSAOs’ protection duties. Providing safety for campus and students is an important role that some SSAOs play. Fisher (2015) in his study of developing a profile of the CSAOs’ demographics and characteristics, examined the responsibilities, functional areas, and leadership styles of CSAOs at 23 campuses, found that 12% of the CSAOs at CSU reported having responsibilities in handling crises on campus. CSAOs play some roles in supervising public security or an institution’s safety such as managing crises. Similarly, Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) in their study of developing a profile about the current situation of CSAOs at higher education institutions in the United States examined the demographics, roles, and functional areas of CSAOs, as well as information about them such as challenges and issues they face. They concluded that SSAOs handle crises in their institution and have responsibilities to keep their campus safe. They also
spend almost 11% of their time managing crises on campus. Moreover, Roper and Whitt (2016) in their book, *Angst and Hope: Current Issues in Student Affairs Leadership* examined leadership experiences of SSAOs as well as the challenges and the opportunities within their role in private and public colleges and universities across the United States. They found that student affairs leaders mentioned that institution and student safety is a top priority of their work and a major concern for them. Therefore, student affairs leaders develop leadership skills to manage crises effectively.

**Promoting diversity.** Most SSAOs provide inclusive participation and promote diversity when they perform their work responsibilities. Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) in their study of developing a profile about the current situation of CSAOs at higher education institutions in the United States examined the demographics, roles, and functional areas of CSAOs, as well as information about them such as challenges and issues they face. According to Wesaw and Sponsler, CSAOs in US higher education institutions spend 30% of their time doing administrative tasks while they allocate 13% of their time to interact with students. CSAOs’ response ranked leadership actions they use when supervising employees as empowering others to participate, developing a shared vision, leading by example, and providing challenging tasks. Roper and Whitt (2016) in their book, *Angst and Hope: Current Issues in Student Affairs Leadership* examined leadership experiences of SSAOs as well as the challenges and the opportunities within their role in private and public colleges and universities across the United States. They concluded that student affairs administrators have responsibilities in developing a diverse and inclusive community on their campus. These administrators along with their staff focus on attracting and retaining students from different
populations. Similarly, Moneta (2017) in his book, *Enacting Intersectionality in Student Affairs: New Directions for Student Services*, examined how SSAOs integrate intersectionality into preforming their responsibilities in the workplace. He found that SSAOs are intentionally inclusive when they develop strategic plans and perform administrative duties. They form a committee that is comprised of administrators and other individuals who represent different populations on their campus. Moneta also recommends that SSAOs develop strategic planning that is in alignment with their institutions’ values and promote intersectionality.

**Female SSAOs at the Workplace**

Female SSAOs’ situations at the workplace include a description of women’s experiences in higher education institutions. Particularly, the description covered female leaders in mid and top-level leadership positions. The existing literature on female leadership positions in colleges and universities investigate issues related to the employees finding balance between their personal and professional lives. The literature focuses on female leaders’ experiences in mentorship, which includes obstacles and opportunities that they experience in their job. This literature also begins by investigating women’s presence in administrative positions and concluding that they have a lower presence than men. Furthermore, the studies in this field often examine the challenges that female administrators face and the strategies that they use in their advancement to upper level administrative positions. This literature will be compared to my study’s findings in regard to the description of the challenges that female SSAOs face, as well as the success strategies that these women use within their leadership positions.
Female Leaders Advancement to Top Leadership Positions

Female leaders advancement to top leadership positions addresses women’s presence in administrative positions in higher education institutions. This advancement also addresses the pathways of female leaders to top leadership positions such as Dean, Vice President, or President of an institution (Ballenger, 2010; Woollen, 2016). Furthermore, the main focus of the literature will address the obstacles that women face in their advancement to top positions, as well as the effective strategies that they use to excel in their position.

**Glass ceiling.** Women in higher education institutions have a lower presence in top leadership positions, and many experience what is referred to as a glass ceiling. According to Ballenger (2010), Peterson (2014), and Sabharwal (2015), “Glass ceiling” is defined as the idea that many women can be excluded from acquiring top leadership positions in institutions due to facing invisible barriers. Women can face obstacles in their advancement to top leadership positions in multiple fields such as higher education, corporate, and government administration. Moreover, Fisher (2015) in his study of developing a profile of the CSAOs’ demographics and characteristics, examined the responsibilities, functional areas, and leadership styles of CSAOs at 23 campuses, found that the current CSAOs at the CSU were made up of mostly men in the age range from 50 to 59 years old. Additionally, 56% of the CSAOs were male while 43.8% were female. Similarly, Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) in their study of developing a profile about the current situation of CSAOs at higher education institutions in the United States examined the demographics, roles, and functional areas of CSAOs, as well as information about them such as challenges and issues they face. They found that 49% of CSAOs in higher
education institutions in the United States identified that they are women, while 51% identified themselves as men.

**Gender bias actions.** Gender bias behaviors can limit women’s progression to upper level positions (Biddix, Giddens, Darsey, Fricks, Tucker, & Robertson, 2012, Halberg, 1987; Woollen, 2016). Ballenger (2010) in this study of the experiences of women’s advancement to top leadership positions, examined the obstacles and opportunities that female leaders face in their advancement to presidency in higher education institutions. He found that unfair evaluation of women’s credentials is a critical challenge in the hiring process. Some female administrators reported that the hiring committees in their institutions are mostly comprised of men. These hiring committees have demonstrated unequal behaviors, such as preferring male administrators and providing unequal pay scales for women. In addition, men in the workplace tend to develop networks or inner circles, which often include only male administrators. They also perform multiple activities and keep important information inside these exclusive circles. Moreover, they discuss organizational matters and make decisions about individuals without consulting with female administrators. Therefore, women find themselves blocked from access to top leadership positions and miss important opportunities.

**Lack of motivation.** Female leaders might not have the motivation to seek top leadership positions. Cejda (2008) in his study of the experiences of female Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) in community colleges, examined the experiences of these women regarding their advancement to upper level administration positions, including their careers’ situations in the workplace. He found that some female CAOs were not
highly driven to seek administrative positions. He also found that some CAOs did not face gender bias in their advancement, and others did not recognize it as a hindrance. In addition, these findings are similar to findings acquired by Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, and White (2015) who found that 46% of female administrators did not see themselves as a good fit for holding or handling leadership roles. Furthermore, Collins (2009) in his study of experiences of six mid-level female student affairs professionals who were nominated to be Vice President of Student Affairs but they turned down this opportunity, explored the personal and professional aspects that led these women to make this decision about their careers. He found that female administrators see applying for the role of Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, or moving from an administrator role to another, can be complicated and affect their ability to find balance between their work and personal lives. They normally apply for a variety of institutions, so it might result in them changing geographical locations for their work as well. This can be problematic for women with children. Since many female leaders face challenges in their advancement to top leadership positions, they use strategies that enable them to achieve their goals.

**Gaining experiences.** Having multiple administrative experiences increases women’s advancement to upper level leadership positions. Ballenger (2010) in this study of the experiences of women’s advancement to top leadership positions examined the obstacles and opportunities that female leaders face in their advancement to presidency in higher education institutions. He found that having various experiences allows the administration of colleges and universities to hire effective women in leadership positions. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Cejda (2008) and Biddix, Giddens, Darsey, Fricks, Tucker, and Robertson (2012) who found that several top level
female administrators gained leadership skills and rich experiences throughout their careers. Some female CAOs or SSAOs worked at different types of institutions such as administrators at public colleges and universities, and principals in K-12. Moreover, other female administrators received formal professional development through which they developed leadership experiences, gained degrees, and attended professional workshops. Similarly, Woollen (2016) in his study of women’s pathways to presidency at public and private four-year institutions examined the experiences of six female administrators in their advancement to the presidency of colleges and universities. He found that having past administrative experiences accelerated women’s advancement to senior leadership positions. He also found that these experiences are needed to lead institutions and encourage stakeholders to support the process of hiring women into the president’s role.

Mentorship. The research provided conflicting findings about the impact of gender bias on women’s mentoring experiences. Ballenger (2010) in this study of the experiences of women’s advancement to top leadership positions examined the obstacles and opportunities that female leaders face in their advancement to presidency in higher education institutions. He found that female administrators reported being excluded from important networks. These women also mentioned that when male administrators gather with their male peers, they limit mentoring opportunities for themselves, so it becomes hard for female administrators to have male mentors. However, this finding is different from findings acquired by Cejda (2008) who found that most female CAOs in his study mentioned the importance of having mentors for developing effective administrative skills and acquiring leadership positions. In contrast, other female CAOs felt that having mentors was not the most important strategy that prepared them for leadership positions.
Further, some female CAOs mentioned that their work as mentors for other female leaders was especially helpful in their careers.

**Applying laws.** The administration in colleges and universities supports the process of hiring competent female leaders. Ballenger (2010) in this study of the experiences of women’s advancement to top leadership positions examined the obstacles and opportunities that female leaders face in their advancement to presidency in higher education institutions. He found that most large four-year public institution administrations support the affirmative action law and hire competent women into leadership positions. He also mentioned that one female administrator reported that her institution supports diversity in the hiring process. As a result, the university promoted her from being a teaching faculty member to an administrator at the upper level of leadership within the university. These findings are similar to findings acquired by Woollen (2016) who found that some stakeholders support the idea of hiring effective women as a president in higher education institutions regardless of their experience. Some of these female presidents come from different administrative positions other than higher education and hold diverse degrees. Similarly, Cejda (2008) in his study of the experiences of female CAOs in community colleges, examined the experiences of these women regarding their advancement to upper level administration positions including their careers’ situations in the workplace. He found that most female CAOs who aim to hold this position acquired formal and informal development to improve their leadership skills, which increases their opportunities to be hired by their institutions. Female CAOs also mentioned that it is imperative to be able to communicate well both in writing and verbally.
Female Leaders Maintaining Work-Family Life Balance

Female leaders’ situation in maintaining balance addresses their experiences in finding balance among personal, professional, and social lives (Collins, 2009; Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregoy, 2005; Spurlock, 2009). Maintaining work-life balance focuses on women’s situations and performances in the workplace. The majority of female leaders strive to be effective in both their work and personal lives. However, this effectiveness can come at a cost. Some female leaders avoid seeking top leadership positions while others leave their jobs. Other women keep their jobs, but they face some challenges and use effective strategies, which enables them to succeed. The literature will focus on describing the challenges as well as the strategies that women experience while balancing their family-work lives.

Definition of finding balance. Finding balance between their professional and personal life is essential for women in higher education institutions. Female administrators define finding work-family life balance differently. Spurlock (2009) in his study of the experiences of nine female SSAOs regarding their private and professional lives examined how they integrate their work, family and social lives as well as how their gender impacts their experiences. He found that nearly all female SSAOs reported having professional, personal, and social life. However, these lives are not distinctly separated. Female SSAOs are supposed to find balance in their lives and meet the demands of each one. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, and Gregoy (2005) who found that administrators in student affairs division perceive finding balance differently. They see finding balance as having professional and personal life. In addition, these administrators focused on the importance of spending time with family, taking care
of physical health and being successful in work environment. They also define finding balance as being able to prioritize, such as focusing on what needs to be done first. This finding is similar to finding acquired by Collins (2009) who found that female administrators turn down opportunity to be vice presidents of student affairs due to the increased demands of this position that ultimately put them under stress. They are aware that they will become unable to balance their work-family life.

**Inability to find balance.** Most administrators face challenges in finding a balance due to work demands. Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, and Gregoy (2005) in their study of the experiences of 11 student affairs educators in balancing their work-family lives examined what finding balance means to these professionals and how they describe beneficial strategies that they use to achieve it. He found that most student affairs administrators, whether female or male, did not see themselves as perfect in achieving balance. They defined finding balance from other people that they see as examples of being balanced. Moreover, in a related study, Spurlock (2009) in his study of the experiences of nine female SSAOs regarding their private and professional lives examined how they integrate their work, family and social lives as well as how their gender impacts their experiences. He concluded that female SSAOs, particularly mothers, face difficulty-finding balance among their work, personal, and social lives. Spurlock found that these women feel guilty and have concerns because they are unable to be balanced. They reported spending longer hours to achieve work demands and a few hours in their personal life and relationships. Women reported having a child changes almost everything. It can impact these women’s decisions about their careers, so they rethink their choices such as delaying their work. These findings are similar to findings acquired
by Collins (2009) who found that most women realized that working in student affairs unit is demanding and being vice president requires more commitment. Most of these women avoid pursuing this position due to its massive responsibilities. This position has broad scope of responsibilities inside and outside their institution. Most female professionals are aware that being successful in meeting this work’s demands will be overwhelming. It requires extra time and work commitment, which left them unable to balance their personal and professional life.

**Difficulty of finding balance.** Achieving balance comes with cost. When administrators work to achieve balance they become under stress. According to Guthrie et al. (2005), working as student affairs professional is challenging. This role is demanding which makes many administrators intersect their family and professional life. Some professionals engage their spouse in campus events in order to spend some times with them. Moreover, Spurlock (2009) found that when women work to achieve balance they become isolated. They work to meet professional and family demands but they become unable to have friends. Finding balance in the work environment also increases the stress level of these women. Collins (2009) found in order to increase credibility as administrators; female professionals need to pursue a doctorate, which is also challenging their ability to find balance.

**Techniques for balancing work and personal lives.** Since many female administrators found that their personal and professional lives are intersected, so they recommend engaging their family members within their work. Collins (2009) in his study of experiences of six mid-level female student affairs professionals who were nominated to be Vice President of Student Affairs but they turned down this opportunity; he
explored the personal and professional aspects that led these women to make this
decision about their careers. He found that female administrators learned that student
affairs professionals should be responsible for finding balance in their family-work life.
They should make effective choices and seek help from mentors. In addition, this finding
is similar to findings acquired by Guthrie et al. (2005) who found that nearly all student
affairs administrators suggested integrating work-family lives such as engaging family
members such as sons or daughters in campus activities such as playing football. This
finding agrees with Spurlock’ (2009) findings in terms of including significant others in
universities’ events.

**Choosing a suitable job.** Female administrators should make effective decisions
about their careers. They should be aware of the nature of student affairs work before
pursuing it. Spurlock (2009) in his study of the experiences of nine female SSAOs
regarding their private and professional lives examined how they integrate their work,
family and social lives as well as how their gender impacts their experiences. He found
that female professionals reported that student affairs work is often filled with multiple
responsibilities and constant work crises. These responsibilities and excessive demands
are increasing in the position of vice presidents, which affect these women ability to find
balance. Similarly, this finding agrees with findings acquired by Collins (2009) who
found that female administrators should have self-knowledge such as knowing what they
prefer to do or to be in in terms of their work. Therefore, they should choose the work
that matches their values. They need to be able to choose to work in an institution that
meets their needs. Moreover, this finding is similar to findings acquired by Guthrie et al.
found that student affairs administrators focused on the importance of making quick decisions as well as selecting effective options in regard to their work environment.

**Female Leaders’ Mentorship**

Female leaders’ mentorship addresses female leaders’ experiences regarding having mentors or mentoring other women (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, and White (2015). The literature focuses on what is known in the current research about women mentoring experiences. The literature discusses the idea of having formal or informal mentors who work as advisor for female leaders in their advancement to top leadership position or within their position. Further, the literature addresses the issues that female leaders face regarding mentorship. Some women did not recognize the benefit of having formal mentors while others perceived mentoring as an important tool for their success. Some women face gender biases in the workplace and others are unable to find male mentors.

**Informal mentors.** Many female administrators have mentors during their careers who can be described as informal mentors. Hill and Wheat (2017) in their study of the impact of mentorship and role models on university female top-level leaders’ advancement to the presidency, examined the mentoring experiences of 16 women regarding leadership and their career progression to upper level positions. They found that female presidents had their husbands work as advisors for them throughout their advancement to leadership positions and during their occupation of the role. Similarly, Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) in their study of the mentoring experiences of female leaders who aspire to top leadership positions in higher education institutions in Tennessee examined these women’s views about having mentors and the effectiveness of
the interactions with them. They found that almost 87% of Caucasian female administrators in higher education institutions in Tennessee reported having mentors. Additionally, 90% of these Caucasian administrators developed informal mentoring relations with their mentors. Almost 88% of women had Caucasian mentors. This finding agrees with Hannum’s et al. (2015) finding in terms of perceiving mentorship as a helpful approach for women. Woman in senior leadership positions mentioned having mentors or role models who they consult with and learn from.

**Female mentors.** Women who are the first in this position can become effective mentors or role models. Hill and Wheat (2017) in their study of the impact of mentorship and role models on university female top-level leaders’ advancement to the presidency, examined the mentoring experiences of 16 women regarding leadership and their career progression to upper level positions. They concluded that most female administrators who were the first woman to hold the highest leadership position in their universities reported having male mentors. They also worked as mentors for other women in administrative positions. Similarly, Cejda (2008) in his study of the experiences of female CAOs in community colleges examined the experiences of these women regarding their advancement to upper level administration positions including their careers’ situations in the workplace. He found that when female administrators at community colleges become CAOs they provide mentorship to other women who aspire to this role. Collins (2009) also found that some female SSAOs worked as mentors for young student affairs administrators.

**Increased status.** Holding top leadership positions increase women status and they provide mentorship for other women. Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) in their study
of the mentoring experiences of female leaders who aspire to top leadership positions in higher education institutions in Tennessee examined these women’s views about having mentors and the effectiveness of the interactions with them. They found that there is no difference between male and female performances as mentors; they provide similar professional or psychosocial mentoring services. In addition, according to Hill and Wheat (2017), when women reach upper level leadership positions in their institution, they gain higher status and, consequently, mentor other women. Similarly, this finding agrees with Hannum’s et al. (2015) finding in terms of found that female senior leaders who hold this role become role models for women. These women will look up to them, which makes them feel rewarded.

**Formal mentoring.** Female leaders have conflicting views about receiving formal mentoring. Some women recognize the benefits of having formal mentors while others did not feel that formal mentoring is effective. Hill and Wheat (2017) in their study of the impact of mentorship and role models on university female top-level leaders’ advancement to the presidency, examined the mentoring experiences of 16 women regarding leadership and their career progression to upper level positions. They found that female administrators receive support from mentors, advice about career choices, and encouragement to pursue leadership positions. Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) found that female leaders’ responses indicated that mentors from a higher position than theirs tend to be more effective than mentors from the same rank. However, this finding is different from findings acquired by Hannum et al. (2015) who reported that 20% of White female senior leaders perceived mentoring experiences as important while 7% of African American senior leaders said the same thing. Similarly, Cejda (2008) in his study of the
experiences of female CAOs in community colleges found these women had rarely seen mentorship as effective tools that prepared them for leadership roles.

**Gender issues.** Some women can face challenges in mentoring due to issues related to their gender. According to Hill and Wheat (2017), there is a lack of female mentors due to the limited number of women in high ranking positions. Therefore, it is rare for female administrators to find female mentors. Hill and Wheat (2017) also mentioned that when women seek lower ranking positions, they find female mentors such as deans or vice presidents. Furthermore, Ballenger (2010) in this study of the experiences of women’s advancement to top leadership positions examined the obstacles and opportunities that female leaders face in their advancement to presidency in higher education institutions. He found that female administrators reported that being excluded from the inner circle in their institutions due to gender bias. Most men network with each other and limit mentioning relationships for their male colleagues.

**Decision-Making in the Workplace**

Decision-Making in the workplace describes decision-making styles that leaders use in different types of organizations. The literature on decision-making provides multiple definitions for decision-making and description of several styles that leaders can use such as individual and participative styles. Although most of the studies are outdated or conducted in different sectors, they inform my study in many ways. They provide detailed description of decision-making styles in the work settings that female SSAOs use when they handle their job responsibilities. The literature will focus on describing how leaders make decisions in most organizations such as business companies, public agencies, or colleges and universities. Furthermore, the literature provides detailed
information about decision-making styles in the work environment, which include a discussion of group meetings and individual process. It further includes a description of decision-making styles or processes that leaders are more likely to use while handling their job duties.

**Description of Decision-Making**

**Definitions of decision-making.** Decision-making is processes for handling workplace responsibilities. Vroom and Yetton (1973) concluded that the definition of decision-making is what leaders do or what approach they use in order to solve problems, including how they behave with their subordinates. They found that managers’ responses indicated that decision-making includes choosing the most desirable and effective approaches to handle a situation. These approaches include collecting information and engaging employees in the process of decisions making. Similarly, Tannebaum and Schmidt (1958) defined decision-making as the degree to which leaders practice their authority and enable their subordinates to participate in discussions that lead to a decision. Furthermore, Vaccaro, McCoy, Champagne, and Siegel (2013) suggested that decision-making is a process that results in an outcome. This process can determine whether a decision is effective or ineffective. Student affairs professionals can learn from both the consequences of their decisions and the processes that lead them to make certain choices.

**Subordinates’ participation.** It is important for leaders to increase subordinates’ participation in the process of decision-making to make effective decisions. Vroom and Yetton (1973) in their study of managers’ decision-making styles who work in different organizational sectors in the United States examined the process of decision-making and
leadership styles. They found that leaders engage their subordinates in the process of decision-making when they want to make highly effective decisions. Similarly, Vaccaro, McCoy, Champagne and Siegel (2013) in their book, *Decisions Matter: Using a Decision-Making Framework with Contemporary Student Affairs Case Studies* examined decision-making experiences, as well as the major and small challenges that student affairs professionals face in the work environment. They suggested that student affairs professionals should consult with administrators and their leaders in order to make high quality decisions. They recommend these professionals to consult with experts and other administrators through the process of decision-making. For example, they should consult with experts when they define the core of the problem, brainstorm solutions, and assess the validity of their solutions. Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) in their popular classic article, *How to choose a leadership pattern: should a manager be democratic or autocratic; or something in between?* provided successful descriptions of how leaders should lead in their institutions. According to Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958), leaders have the option to seek advice or assistance from expert employees in their team; so they discuss the issues with team members by having a one on one consultation. Leaders further have the option to have one on one consultation with their team members, and they can make decisions based on their team’s suggestions or without them.

**Decision-Making in the Work Environment**

**Group meetings.** Leaders can make decisions together during a group meeting. According to Maccoy, Champagne, Siegel, and Vaccaro (2013), student affairs professionals prepare their plans and then make a group meeting to discuss their decisions or plans. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Vroom and Yetton
(1973) who found, leaders use an interactive decision-making style when they want to decide on something and apply the decision. This application of the decision requires support from the subordinates. Leaders also engage their subordinates in making decisions when they have low level of conflicts among each other. However, this finding is different from findings acquired by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) who suggested that leaders can choose to discuss extreme issues with their team members in a group meeting, so they brainstorm solutions in a collaborative manner and then leaders make the final decision.

**Making decisions individually.** Leaders can make decisions independently. According to Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958), when leaders make decisions, they can collect information and then decide alone. Leaders also can be in charge of the process of decision-making, so they decide and then inform people about it. Vroom and Yetton (1973) found that leaders make decisions individually when they face well-structured issues that have a well-defined procedure to handle them. Leaders also tend to limit their subordinates’ participation in decision-making when they have the necessary information to fix the issues. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Maccoy, Champagne, Siegel, and Vaccaro (2013) who recommended that when student affairs administrators handle a problem, they should review the institutions’ protocols to develop multiple solutions.

**Challenges for Women in Decision-Making**

The challenges that women face while making decisions include the obstacles that female leaders face in the workplace which impact their decision-making processes. The current studies will focus on whether women are involved in decision-making or not and
to what extent they are involved. In addition, these studies will address multiple challenges that women face such as lack of fit, increasing workloads, systematic violence, or gender bias behaviors such as unfair evaluation. The findings of these studies describe what is known in the literature about challenges in the workplace, which can occur due to external causes or personal reasons. This current literature will be compared to my study’s findings regarding the challenges that female SSAOs face while making decisions.

**Personal preference.** Decision-making in the workplace can be a personal style. Women have autonomy in doing tasks in their work, so they might choose to do it alone or collaboratively. Rogers (2017), in his study of the experiences of academic women who work in British higher education institutions, examined their situation as they work under systematic violence and how they manage relationships with others. He found that academic women prefer working on research in a team while others do not like it. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Hannum et al. (2015) who found that many women in leadership role mentioned having autonomy to do tasks independently and they exercise their power to do that. They also have the authority to act on these decisions and turn these decisions into actions. Similarly, Sabharwal (2015) in his study of the experiences of women in Senior Executive Service (SES) facing the “Glass Cliff” examined the challenges that these women experience in the field of SES in multiple government organizations. He found that even when women in federal organizations face exclusion from making decisions, but they make some decisions alone.

**Lack of fit.** Female administrators find themselves not fitting into their institution, which is problematic while making decisions. Collins (2009) in his study of
experiences of six mid-level female student affairs professionals who were nominated to be Vice President of Student Affairs but they turned down this opportunity; he explored the personal and professional aspects that led these women to make this decision about their careers. He found that some women served as senior student affairs officer for a short time and they decided not to pursue it due to feeling it was not a good fit. This issue comes from the fact that in this position female administrators have autonomy and are responsible for handling major crises alone. This left them working under stress and unable to make effective decisions. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Hannum’s et al. (2015) who found that over 30% of women in their study reported feeling their position was not a good fit, which affected their decision-making performances. These administrators reported being excluded from important networks, so they missed important conversations and were not part of some decisions. Some women also mentioned that their ideas were not appreciated until a man suggested them.

**Working under increasing workloads.** Female leaders are expected to make decisions to meet work requirements and their responsibilities. Meeting excessive work demands and working under pressure put them under stress. Rogers (2017), in his study of the experiences of academic women who work in British higher education institutions, examined their situation as they work under systematic violence and how they manage relationships with others. He found that women reported working in institution with increased bureaucracy and work demands can create challenging work environment. It results in working under intense emotions and inability to achieve success. According to Collins (2009), the position of Vice President of Student Affairs has a broad scope of responsibilities, which is demanding. Achieving success in handling this position is
overwhelming and time consuming for female administrators. Some women stop pursuing this position because of the fear of extra commitment and not balancing work and family life. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Hannum’s et al. (2015) who found that more than 30% of women reported facing large scope of responsibilities and increasing critical accountability in their work. They work under pressures. For example, they make hard decisions and held accountable for everything can happen in their college or university.

**Systematic violence.** Many female administrators work under systematic violence, which lead them to make ineffective decisions. Emulti, Jia, and Davis (2009) agree with Rogers (2017) that female leaders noted that they face systematic violence in their environment where they work under the pressure of negative emotions that can be caused by people or excessive administrative demand. In a related research, Sabharwal (2015) in his study of the experiences of women in Senior Executive Service (SES) facing the “Glass Cliff” examined the challenges that these women experience in the field of SES in multiple government organizations. He found that women executives face injustice in some federal agencies where they experience unequal treatment compared to their male colleagues and work with toxic relationships, and increased workloads. He also concluded that working under these conditions can lead female administrators to fail or to leave their job. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Hannum’s et al. (2015) who found that 40% of the entire participants in their study faced scrutiny and criticism. For example, these women mentioned that they work under the pressure of constant monitoring of their actions. Individuals in their institution expect them to fail. People question their qualifications and criticize their performances.
Exclusion from making decisions. Research on women’s involvement in making decisions provided contradicting views. Sabharwal (2015) in his study of the experiences of women in Senior Executive Service (SES) facing the “Glass Cliff” examined the challenges that these women experience in the field of SES in multiple government organizations. He found that many female executives are not involved in making organizational decisions at federal agencies. They face this discriminatory action at varying levels in every organization; they are more likely to face this challenge in distributive and constituent policy agencies. Similarly, Collins (2009) in his study of experiences of six mid-level female student affairs professionals who were nominated to be Vice President of Student Affairs but they turned down this opportunity, found that women are excluded from making decisions due to their gender and they need to develop financial skills in order to be included in the decisions. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Spurlock (2009) who found that women are held to different expectations than men when it comes to being involved in negotiations that result in financial decisions. Many female administrators mentioned the importance of learning about business projects in colleges and universities in order to be seen as a good fit. These women also recognized the need to be thoughtful of construction projects and be experienced in handling them. However, this finding is different from findings acquired by Ackerman, DiRamio and Wilson (2005) who studied the knowledge and involvement of SSAOs in making financial decisions. They examined to what extent SSAOs are involved in making these decisions and found that men and female Student Affairs Officers are the same when it comes to involvement in making financial decisions. They
also found that women and men can be included or excluded based on having long years of experience, therefore, gender is not the reason.

**Different standards for women.** Some women face gender bias when it comes to making decisions. They are held to different standards than men in order to avoid being excluded from making decisions. Spurlock (2009) in his study of the experiences of nine female SSAOs regarding their private and professional lives examined how they integrate their work, family and social lives as well as how their gender impacts their experiences. He found that female SSAOs reported the importance of demonstrating decisive authority in order to be included in decision-making. Furthermore, these female SSAOs are expected to be collaborative in their leading style and nurture relationships. Female SSAOs also reported that they constantly communicating with their colleagues, their presidents, and other constituents inside and outside the department. This finding agrees with Hannum’s et al. (2015) findings. They concluded that 60% of female leaders in their study face different expectations from men. Female leaders mentioned that they face social inequality such as being perceived as not capable of handling leadership responsibilities. They are also put under pressure of working double what men do in order to be seen as proficient. Similarly, Sabharwal (2015) found that a number of female administrators at government agencies are more likely to be excluded from making decisions at the institutional level. Women are more likely than men to face institutional injustice such as unequal pay, lack of promotions, and increased workload.

**Strategies for Women in Decision-Making**

The strategies for making effective decisions include strategies that female leaders utilize, and others that institutions should establish. The current literature provides
detailed descriptions of multiple strategies that women use while making decisions, such as having workplace political skills as well as financial experiences. It also describes in details strategies that institutions utilize to support these women while handling their work responsibilities. This existing literature regarding the strategies that female leaders use will be compared to my study’s findings in terms of the strategies that female SSAOs utilize while making decisions.

**Internal motivation.** Having an inner drive to make a difference can enable women to excel at making effective decisions. Some researchers found that most female leaders in upper level administration are motivated by not only making changes in their institution, but also in the lives of people within that institution (Dunn, Gerlach, & Hyle, 2014; Hannum et al. 2015; Melero, 2011; Nakitende, 2012). In addition, according to Hannum et al (2015), female leaders feel a sense of reward when they accomplish this change. These women can be motivated when they assist students, faculty members, and other constituencies to achieve their goals and meet their needs. They also have a positive impact on higher education policies and support their institution’s initiatives, which is internally rewarding. Similarly, Dunn et al. (2014) in their study of gender impact on female leadership examined the perspective of three female senior leaders regarding the influence of gender on their leadership. They found that some female leaders describe success in leadership as coming from inner desire. These women mentioned that seeking leadership positions was a passion for them and they were motivated by making positive change in their workplace. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Sahoo and Lenka (2016) who found that female executives in public organizations tend to excel in
what they do. These female executives bring multiple philosophies, skills, and resources that enhance their organizations’ success.

**Using data.** Promoting a culture of evidence is a strategy to make effective decisions. Female leaders described making decisions based on the use of data as a strategy for generating funds. Dunn et al. (2014) in their study of gender impact on female leadership, examined the perspective of three female senior leaders regarding the influence of gender on their leadership. They reported that female senior leaders stated that leaders need to be able to generate funds and allocate resources in practical and efficient ways. Each woman mentioned traits and skills that enable leaders to generate revenue and allocate resources such as using data and being good in financial or accounting aspects. Similarly, Kerrigan and Jenkins (2013) in their study of the increase of the culture of evidence, examined the usage of data to improve students’ outcomes at Washington State colleges. They found that more than 80% of the administrators at community colleges at Washington State use data frequently to inform their administrative decisions such as enrollment rates and managing budgets.

**Being patient.** Female leaders need to make the decision to handle challenges in the workplace. According to Rogers (2017), some women in British higher education institutions experience the pressure of difficult relationships and unfair increased workloads. They noted that dealing with difficult employees can be a challenge for them such as being irresponsible or denying their mistakes. Furthermore, this finding agrees with Dunn’s et al. (2014) findings in their study of gender impact on female leadership. They found that women in senior academic leadership roles mentioned that successful leaders are able to make the decision to face stressors that occur from different
sources such as employees, supervisors, and imbalanced personal lives. These women mentioned that they face toxic relationships and are patient about them. For example, dealing with an envious peer who blocks promotions; or dealing with employees who do not do their work and hinder institutions’ progress and there is not a way to ask them to quit their job due to work policies. Similarly, Hannum et al. (2015) found that when a faculty member receives an administrator role, they become untrusted by their previous peers. They become isolated in that position.

**Effective communication.** Interaction and patience to handle difficulties is key for leaders to be effective in making decisions. A number of researchers found that women who work under systemic violence or face hardships in their work environment reported being collaborative and interactive (Christman & McClellan, 2008; Dunn et al., 2014). According to Rogers (2017), some women in academia who experience systemic violence reported faking collaborative actions, such as being a member in organizations or being involved in unwanted relationships, because that was what they had to do. Other female leaders instead recommend interacting with others as a way to better understand them and get along. This finding is similar with findings acquired by Dunn et al. (2014) who found communication and interaction with employees, especially the difficult ones, is important for leaders to succeed. This interaction can result in understanding these employees, being able to empathize with them, and overcoming prejudice against them. Similarly, Baskerville-Watkins and Smith (2014) in their study of the importance of political skills for women in male-dominated workplaces examined whether or not having political skills enables women to acquire a position of power in these male-dominated organizations. They found that women who have political skills tend to do
better in the workplace than others with low levels of political skills or that do not have them. Baskerville-Watkins and Smith (2014) also found that those who work in a male dominated workplace with good communication skills and interaction are able to understand others, influence them, and get better information from them. These women are more likely to get their male colleagues to support their work and assist them to move up to positions of authority.

Redefining the role. Institutions should rethink the structure of upper level administrative roles to achieve gender equality among leaders. Dunn et al. (2014) wondered whether senior leadership roles are designed in a way that allows women to work with less stress than their male peers. Additionally, they questioned the validity of these positions in achieving gender equality where women are able to find personal and professional balance. They urge institutions to redefine the obligations of this role to enable female leaders to find balance as their male peers do. Moreover, female leaders can have a positive impact on bringing effective change to their institutions. They can establish policies or initiatives that improve women’s conditions and meet their needs. According to Hannum et al. (2015), women in top leadership roles mentioned that they have influence over higher education policies and support initiatives in their college or university. Female managers are more likely to make decisions based on life long outlooks and equality in dealing with employees’ disciplinary issues more than men. Similarly, Spurlock (2009) found that women are more likely to report inability to balance their family and work lives due to being successful in work, and having more family demands.
Appointing more female administrators. Higher education institutions may need to increase the presence of women in leadership roles. As a result of the presence of women in leadership roles, more employees including women can participate in making important decisions and the sense of community can be increased in this environment (Hamidullah et al., 2015; Melero, 2011). Moreover, senior leaders need to develop and support gender diversity initiatives in their institutions. Sahoo and Lenka (2016) in their study of opportunity for organizations by breaking the “Glass ceiling”, examined the benefit of increasing women’s presence in leadership positions in organizations. They found that business companies provide gender diversity initiatives in order to promote equality between men and women employees. Some organizations with a high percentage of women employees report having an increase in their productivity in financial and non-financial aspects due to the competencies and the performances of women. Sahoo and Lenka (2016) agrees with Baskerville-Watkins and Smith (2014) that increasing the percentage of women can help in eliminating prejudices or stereotypes about women, such as not being capable as leaders. Baskerville-Watkins and Smith (2014) concluded that when women have political skills and hold a position of power, they practice their authority by making high-level decisions effectively. With this competent performance, they might be able to give good impressions about female leadership, and they correct stereotypes of women as leaders.

Empowering women. Some institutions might have a macho culture, and these institutions are supposed to handle this issue. Senior level administrators can play an important role in this process. When some female administrators work in a male dominated environment, they become stressed. Baskerville-Watkins and Smith (2014)
concluded that many female lawyers with a low level of political skills tend to be blocked from obtaining positions of power and are unable to make important decisions. Furthermore, men in this type of environment tend to be more congruent. They are more likely to strengthen each other and exclude women. According to Sahoo and Lenka (2016), senior leaders need to investigate employees’ conditions to see if they face negative behaviors, such as bullying, gender biases actions, and increased workloads. Sahoo and Lenka (2016) also suggested that senior leaders work to remove gender stereotyping about women in their institutions. They work to support women psychologically and exercise their authority to achieve equality among individuals.

**The Experiences of Female SSAOs in Decision-Making**

Female SSAOs’ experiences focus on making decisions while working in higher education institutions. The existing literature addresses the experiences of female administrators who work in mid level management and top level administration such as Deans, Vice Presidents, Chief Academic Officers, and Directors. The current literature addresses the experiences of female administrators while seeking top-level positions and while handling workplace responsibilities. Although most of these studies are outdated or conducted in different types of institutions, they inform my study in many ways. They provide detailed descriptions of female administrators’ decision-making styles in the work setting, their professional skills, and their ways of handling job responsibilities. These detailed descriptions will be compared with the findings of my study concerning female SSAOs’ experiences throughout their careers.
The Professional Skills of Female SSAOs in Decision-Making

**Being responsible.** Some female senior leaders are taking charge of making decisions more often when they handle work responsibilities. Christman and McClellan (2008) in their study of leadership styles of female upper level administrators in higher education institutions, examined how these women lead and make decisions in the educational leadership programs on a regular basis. They described being authoritative, having perseverance, being highly driven through success, and strongly avoid failing as masculine leadership traits. They found that female administrators in their study have these qualities. More importantly, they choose them as their strongest qualities that they use in their work environment. Similarly, Montague (2011) found that female SSAOs focus on doing the most urgent actions before those they see as less important. They also accept the responsibilities over their decisions and take moderate risks. Research tends to show that making effective decisions and the ability to prioritize in the workplace is important for female SSAOs (Kleihauer, Stephens, Hart, & Stripling, 2013; Montague, 2011; Nakitende, 2012). Therefore, these women are keen to make high quality decisions.

**Making effective decisions.** Most female SSAOs strive to make high quality decisions by being professionals in their performances (Cejda, 2008; Halberg, 1987; Montague, 2011; Nakitende, 2012). According to Cejda (2008), female leaders work to be successful in handling work tasks in the workplace. They seek professional development, such as getting degrees, attending conferences, and learning communication skills. They also learn from past experiences regarding leadership practices in their workplace. Similarly, Nakitende (2012) in his study of senior female leaders’ motivation and success in colleges and universities, examined what influences
female upper level administrators to seek leadership positions and persevere in their institutions. He found that female SSAOs in his study tend to take the time to consult with staff and others to check the rationale of the decisions that they make. Nakitende (2012) also found that they are able to make tough decisions. When they need to make decisions to deal with extreme challenges, they are more likely to consult with others, think critically, and mediate.

**Female SSAOs’ Decision-Making Styles**

**Adaptive decision-making.** Most female SSAOs demonstrate a flexible decision-making style in the workplace. Christman and McClellan (2008), in their study of leadership styles of female upper level administrators in higher education institutions, examined how these women lead and make decisions in the educational leadership programs on a regular basis. They found that some female administrators are being resilient in their leadership styles by switching them based on what a situation requires. They demonstrate feminine and masculine behaviors while leading in the workplace. Christman and McClellan (2008) also found that some female administrators demonstrate a collegial leadership style, which is a feminine leading style, and it makes them stronger leaders. They can take charge of their work, being decisive and controlling based on what a situation needs. For example, when they face hardships in handling work responsibilities, they tend to be authoritative and do what it takes to deal with the situation. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Guidry (2007) and Montague (2011) who studied the leadership styles of female SSAOs at public and four year private institutions in the United States. They examined what leadership styles these women use in their workplaces as described by Bolmen and Deal, and found that it is rare for most
female SSAOs to use one decision-making style when they handle work responsibilities. They use multiple decision-making forms that change based on what is best for a given situation. Montague (2011) found that 50% of the female SSAOs’ responses indicated that they use multiple leadership styles in the workplace. They use political, structure, human resources, and symbolic leadership styles. The most favored leadership style was human resources, where 20% of the participants choose it over other leadership styles.

**Participative decision-making.** Most female SSAOs demonstrate a collaborative decision-making style in the work settings. In his study of the role of gender stereotypes and decision-making styles of female Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAOs), Halberg (1987) examined some factors, such as facing gender stereotypes and the decision-making styles by comparing the experiences of female SSAOs and female middle managers. He found that female SSAOs consult with each other, including other administrators, in order to make rational decisions. Although Halberg’s (1987) study is outdated, it still has some truth about some female SSAOs’ decision-making styles. Although these women used to make decisions in a social manner in the past, some of them continued to have the same style until recent years. This finding is similar to findings obtained by Montague (2011) who found that many female SSAOs utilize a human resources leadership style in handling work responsibilities and dealing with the employees. Some female SSAOs are still using a collaborative decision-making style and engaging their employees in the process of decision-making. They are more likely to invest in their subordinates and engage them in making important decisions.

**Networking and getting support.** Many female administrators utilize networks to make effective decisions. Halberg (1987) who studied the role of gender stereotypes
and decision-making styles of female CSAOs found that when SSAOs make decisions, they consult with others. They develop networks and depend on them. When these women develop networks, they connect themselves to administrators who support each other. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Nakitende (2012), who found that in order for some female senior leaders to perform better in their work environment, they build effective relationships, develop and nurture these relations, and are able to handle conflicts. Similarly, Christman and McClellan (2008) describe developing and nurturing relationships with employees as a feminine quality. They found that female administrators use these feminine traits when they handle conflict among employees. They use interpersonal relationships to ease and strengthen the interaction with employees. When female administrators make decisions or take actions they receive their employees’ support. Spurlock (2009) found that gender had impact on female SSAOs’ performances. They mentioned that they need to be decisive in order to be involved in making decisions at the institutional level. Furthermore, some female SSAOs are expected to demonstrate collaborative leadership where they are supposed to develop relationships with different constituents in their institution. These women found being collaborative increased their success in their work.

**Decision-Making in Higher Education Institutions**

Decision-making processes in higher education institutions can be different based on the size and type of an institution. The current literature on decision making in colleges and universities focuses on the process of making decisions within different types of institutions such as four-year public and private colleges and universities. However, most of the literature about decision-making within higher education
institutions focuses on academic decision-making. In addition, my study explores the experiences of decision-making in different types of institutions so these findings can be compared to the findings of my study. The distribution of power and who has the authority in a college or university also affects how decisions are made by the staff of these institutions.

**Decision-making in small institutions.** Colleges and universities have different decision-making processes. Gardner, Miller, Barker, Loftin, Erwin, and Maurin (2007) in their study of the experiences of student affairs professionals of handling the impact of Hurricane Katrina that hit New Orleans in 2005, examined their experiences of decision-making in four-year public and private institutions on an average day, and especially during a crisis. They found that the decision-making structure varies based on an institution’s type and whether it is a large public or a small private institution. Administrators in small institutions (which happened to be private) tend to be included in making decisions. Small institutions tend to have a collegiate leadership style in which employees share values and authority, and they have a horizontal hierarchical organization. Thus, administrators are more likely to have input in making decisions and be satisfied with practicing their power.

**Decision-making in large institutions.** Decision making in large higher education institutions could be a centralized process. Gardner et al. (2007) found that mid-level administrators in large institutions (which happened to be public universities) mentioned that they were excluded from making important decisions. In this type of institution, top administrators make almost all the decisions, and then inform midlevel
administrators. These institutions tend to have a vertical hierarchical organization and have less collaborative decision-making processes.

**Decision-making in four-year institutions.** Decision-making in four-year institutions can be participatory or not based on power distribution. Apkarian, Mulligan, Rotondi, and Brint (2014) in their study of government and academic decision-making in four-year higher education institutions, examined the power of using two models in governing which are dual and managerial control. They found that half of CAOs reported that administrators are the primary decision makers in their institutions, while the other half of CAOs concluded that faculty are highly participative in making decisions. Therefore, decision-making depends on the individuals who have the power to decide and act within the institutions.

**Crises on Campuses**

Crises can occur on campuses of all types of higher education institutions. A crisis can be a severe incident that affects a large number of students, such as the loss of human life. The current literature provides rich information about the definition of crises and their types on campuses. The literature also focuses on leaders’ perspectives on the impact of crises on stakeholders and institutions’ operations. Additionally, these studies describe the role of leaders, administrators, and staff in handling crises on their campuses as well as how different types of institutions are prepared and equipped to deal with extreme events. This existing literature will be compared to my study’s findings concerning the experiences of female SSAOs in handling crises on campuses.

**Crisis definition.** It is hard to define crises on campuses as they can take many forms that are related mostly to students. Garcia (2015) in his study of crisis leadership in
colleges and universities in the State of Florida examined how State University System’s (SUS) presidents and crisis managers define and manage a crisis on their campuses. He found that most presidents at the SUS in Florida define crises as negative events that cause damage to institutions’ community. For instance, a crisis can be something that affects students such as the loss of human life. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Covington (2013) who found that some SSAOs at four-year small and large institutions described crisis as any tragedy that has a negative impact on the institutions such as a hurricane, fire, suicide, or sexual assault. However, this finding is different from findings acquired by Benjamin (2014) who found that the Deans of Students at the SUS in Florida defined a crisis as being a large or small emergency situation that threatens the stability of a campus. Negative outcomes often can result from crises (such as explosion, abduction, or murder) that individuals, employees or students can experience. Similarly, Zdziarski, Dunkel and Rollo (2007) defined a crisis on campus as being unexpected negative events that cause damage for the entire college or university. Crises also hinder institutions from performing their daily tasks, disturb its existence, and ruin their financial resources and status.

**Crisis types.** There are multiple types of crises, which can be categorized into two groups: institutional crises and students’ issues. Benjamin (2014) in his study of Dean of Students’ role as a crisis manager at Florida SUS examined how Deans of Students define a crisis and the process to handle it at SUS. He found that drops in fiscal resources and terrorist activities were the major crises that happen frequently at SUS. This finding is similar to findings obtained by Covington (2013) who studied small colleges and universities. He found that SSAOs reported that their institutions had
developed contingency plans for other crises such as tornados, kidnappings, earthquakes, evacuating campuses, and floods. However, this finding is different from findings acquired by Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) who found that CSAOs in higher education in the United States reported facing multiple students’ issues such as suicide attempts. They also found that CSAOs deal with problems such as psychological concerns, preventing suicide, alcohol or drugs abuse, or violence. Similarly, Covington (2013) agrees with Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) in that most SSAOs reported that their institutions had developed emergency plans for handling crises related to students such as suicide, severe weather, fire, and sexual assault.

**Decision-Making in Times of Crises**

Decision-making in times of crises is a crucial part during handling large scope crises in higher education institutions, such as losses of human life. The literature focuses on decision-making processes that leaders can use while handling a crisis on their campuses. Some leaders follow their institutions’ protocols during extreme events while other leaders become unable to follow them. In addition, making decisions in a collaborative manner is important during extreme events. Further, most studies have shown that leaders often use adaptive decision-making during times of crises due to the disturbing impact those situations can have on institutions and individuals. This current literature will be compared to my study’s findings concerning the experiences of female SSAOs in decision making while handling crises on campuses.

**Adaptive decision-making.** Decision-making in the times of extreme events is highly similar to the decision making that leaders engage in on a daily basis. Leaders can choose the best decision-making style that fits a specific situation. Vaccaro et al. (2013)
in their book, *Decisions Matter: Using a Decision-Making Framework with Contemporary Student Affairs Case Studies* examined decision-making experiences, as well as the major and small challenges that student affairs professionals face in the work environment. They suggested that when student affairs professionals handle small, daily challenges on campus, they consult with experts, peer administrators and supervisors before making their final decisions. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Gardner et al. (2007) who found that student affairs administrators focused on the importance of using adaptive decision-making style after the incident of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Student affairs administrators also mentioned that using multiple decision-making styles while handling the incident is what made them effective leaders. The supervisors also changed their leadership styles by becoming more flexible and resisting losing their tempers with people during high-stress situations. Similarly, Karim (2016) in his study of charismatic leadership while handling crises examined the qualities of charismatic leadership that administrators express while handling crises in their institutions. He found that those qualities are described as adaptive actions by some leadership scholars. The leadership scholars also found that charismatic leaders use transactional and transformational leadership styles based on what a situation requires.

**Following institutions’ protocols.** During a crisis, leaders need to follow their institution’s protocols in order to make effective decisions. According to Vaccaro et al. (2013), student affairs professionals should learn and review their institutions’ protocols so they can follow their instructions when they face a problem or crisis on campus. However, this finding is different from the findings acquired by Gardner et al. (2007) who found following institution’s policies are not that easy when a crisis occurs due to its
potential to cause severe damage. They also found that the administrators made several
decisions without reviewing their university’s manuals, instead focusing on making quick
decisions in order to protect students.

**Collaborative decision-making.** Collaborative work among administrators can
be mandatory for handling crises on campuses. Garcia (2015) in his study of crisis
leadership in colleges and universities in the State of Florida examined how SUS’s
presidents and crisis managers define and manage a crisis on their campuses. He found
that teamwork and collaboration is key in handling crises effectively, and administrators
need to work with other units in their division or institution. They also need to work with
external units that provide emotional support, financial resources, or governmental
support. Similarly, this finding agrees with Karim’s (2016) findings that examined the
qualities of charismatic leadership that administrators express while handling crises in
their institutions. He concluded that charismatic leaders need to collaborate with other
administrators and take on additional opportunities to handle the situation effectively
during a crisis. These leaders should accept the responsibilities of their actions, be
confident, and communicate accurately. Further, charismatic leaders should develop a
shared vision with their team members.

**Challenges in Times of Crises**

Challenges in times of crises are an inevitable reality that leaders can face while
handling crises on their campuses. The current literature focuses on the most common
challenges that negatively impact the performances of leaders during a crisis. These
challenges include struggles that arise due to institutional politics among stakeholders
such as facing uncooperative employees, students, and parents. During a crisis moment,
communication obstacles can also occur. For example, communicating the crisis to important people such as stakeholders, employees, and administrators can be a major challenge because each of those groups of people may have different expectations about how the crisis should be handled. Therefore, a leader has to be strategic about communication during a crisis while still giving individuals the information they need. This existing literature will be compared to my study’s findings concerning the experiences of female SSAOs in describing the challenges that they face while handling crises on campuses.

**Uncertainty.** Many leaders can face ambiguity during crises. Wang and Hutchins (2010) in their study of the shooting that took place at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 2007 (VirginiaTech) examined the major steps about how the institution handled and responded to this tragedy. They found that the administrators in the case of VirginiaTech failed to detect warning signals that indicated a crisis was about to happen, such as constant anger from students. Similarly, James and Wooten (2005) in their study of how companies display competencies during crisis management examined six leadership proficiencies that leaders use while handling crises. They found that leaders might be uncertain about what to do due to limited access to information or inability to think clearly. Therefore, these leaders delegate decision-making responsibilities to either administrators or experts. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Treadwell (2017) and Wang (2008) who concluded that top level leaders (such as SSAOs) in a time of crisis can be full of uncertainty due to the severe impact of a tragedy, limited information about the scope of the incident, lack of training, and lack of experience about how to manage it.
**Lack of preparedness.** Administrators and institutions can be unprepared for handling crises. According to Treadwell (2017), the disturbing nature of tragedies had a negative impact on student affairs administrators psychologically and professionally. They were unable to fully process what had happened, they were overwhelmed with meeting their professional obligations, and they expressed feelings of guilt for increasing workloads to deal with the tragedy’s impact. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Wang and Hutchins (2010) who found in VirginiaTech, the administrators mentioned that the only preparation was the Emergency Response Plan (ERP) of 2005. It included strategies about how to prepare and respond to multiple emergencies such as natural disasters, human accident, and those related to interpersonal violence. However, this plan did not include specific information about how to handle campus shootings. According to James and Wooten (2005), ineffective leaders had a reactive mentality and resisted making changes during a crisis. During a crisis, some leaders can also face vast ambiguity in terms of receiving and communicating crisis information, which they counter by being more conservative in their actions and decisions.

**Leading in the public eye.** Top leaders in higher education can handle crises under the pressure of the public and stakeholders. Garcia (2015) in his study of crisis leadership in colleges and universities in the State of Florida examined how SUS’s presidents and crisis managers define and manage a crisis on their campuses. He found that in terms of the president’s role during a crisis, stakeholders and the public see presidents of the university as top leaders that are responsible for protecting the institution’s image and keeping it working effectively. Moreover, these presidents are aware that they are accountable for their performances when they handle crises.
presidents mentioned that they should work in transparency and have integrity. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Roshan, Warren, and Carr (2016) who studied the usage of social media to communicate crises to stakeholders at organizations in Australia. They examined how organizations use social media as a tool to interact directly with the public and found that decision makers at business organizations communicate with stakeholders through social media during crises. They post an apology about what happened and they address rumors that create damage to the organization. They also reassure the stakeholders and remind them of previous accomplishments. Similarly, Brennan and Stern (2017) studied the role that upper level administrators play when they handle crisis on their campus. They examined leadership tasks that these leaders perform during and after a crisis occurs and found that upper level administrators can handle crises under the pressure of failing or not meeting stakeholders’ expectations. They know that failing can cost them their job, credibility, and legitimacy.

**Facing criticism.** Leaders can face criticism for their performances when communicating crises to the public. According to Roshan, Warren and Carr (2016), some stakeholders use social media to spread rumors, while others provide suggestions to fix the situation. Some stakeholders compared their organizations’ responses to the responses of other organizations that faced similar crises; these stakeholders criticize their organizations for not responding effectively as other organizations do. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Brennan and Stern (2017) who found that many leaders are not prepared for making the necessary decisions while handing crises on campus due to being under stress and facing strong media scrutiny. Similarly, Jacobsen (2010) in his study of leadership styles that administrators use before, during, and after a crisis occurs
examined the challenges that leaders face and strategies that they use while handling crises on campus. He found that some individuals or groups criticized the decisions that upper level administrators made in the effort to support students of the university following a crisis. Others focused on institution’s poor performances; in particular, they criticized leaders’ performances and how these leaders seek staff assistance to minimize a disaster’s impact.

**Workplace politics.** Higher education institutions like any other organization are subject to politics in the workplace (Herdlein, Kretovics, Rossiter, & Sobczak, 2011; Witt, Andrews, & Kacmar, 2000). Herdlein et al. (2011) in their study of institutional politics in student affairs administration examined political actions, sources, and situations to help administrators in their unit to handle this dynamic. They found that all colleges and universities in the United States experience institutional politics; 100% of the VPSAs responses indicated that they faced politics, which influence policy development and decision-making in their work environments. This influence can impact many aspects or divisions of an institution including the unit of student affairs. Most VPSAs reported being committed to handling politics on their campuses and spending almost 50% of their time managing workplace political issues. The root of these politics can be stressful interactions and strained relationships with individuals, such as with presidents, faculty members, and students. They also identified political problems that happened as a result of financial causes, such as resource allocation and budget management. Similarly, Vigoda-Gadot (2007) in his study of employees’ leadership styles, workplace politics, and personnel's performances examined the impact of employees’ perceptions of politics on their functions. He found that workplace politics
happen from lack of trust between employees and leaders and from injustice among employees, such as favoritism. Witt, Andrews, and Kacmar (2000) in their study of the role of participative decision-making, examined the impact of employees’ involvement in decision-making on their perception of workplace politics and job satisfaction at public sector organizations. They found that workplace politics can take many forms and can be as simple as excluding employees from making decisions.

**Politics impact on employees.** Institutional politics can affect employees’ morale. When employees have perception about politics in the workplace, they perceive their supervisors' leadership negatively and have lower performance. Vigoda-Gadot (2007) who examined the impact of employees’ perceptions of workplace politics on their functions, found that when employees face numerous political behaviors they are more likely to have low performance. In addition, when employees experience little to no political behaviors, they become more effective at their work. Similarly, Witt, Andrews, and Kacmar (2000) examined the impact of employees’ involvement in decision-making on their perception of workplace politics and job satisfaction at public sector organizations. They found that employees who face high levels of politics tend to be less satisfied with their job. Their supervisors are more likely to exclude them from making important decisions. Furthermore, institutional politics can also arise from organizational changes that are implemented too quickly, such as inspirational leaders who require employees to do more in a short time without giving them time to develop a new process. In a related study, Kaya, Aydin and Ongun (2016) in their study of the impact of servant leadership and workplace politics examined their impact on mid-level managers’ burnout in organizations. They suggested that servant leaders often work to develop employees
and motivate them to perform at the highest level. Employees might perceive their leaders’ effort as increasing workload and face feeling burned out. However, if these leaders developed a shared vision with their employees and enhanced positive change, the employees would not perceive it negatively.

**Internal politics and handling crises.** Institutional politics can hinder the process of handling a crisis. Jacobsen (2010) in his study of leadership styles that administrators use before, during, and after a crisis occurs examined the challenges that leaders face and strategies that they use while handling crises on campus. He found that some senior level administrators in higher education institutions face difficulty making effective decisions or become slow in handling a crisis on campus due to dealing with workplace politics. In meetings, these leaders also find themselves dealing with employees who dominate the discussions or want to control the process of decision-making. Leaders can find themselves resolving conflicts between departments that are supposed to coordinate in order to assist with the crisis situation. Moreover, institutions without a culture of trust among employees will be subject to severe crises. Similarly, James and Wooten (2005) in their study of how companies display competencies during crisis management examined six leadership proficiencies that leaders use while handling crises. They found that, when there is no open communication and there is a lack of trust in a company, then there is a high chance that a crisis will happen. The employees might not notify the top leaders of coming danger or they may report it to the leader, so the urgency of the situation is not well communicated or effectively understood.
Strategies for Handling Crises

Strategies for handling crises are an important part for leaders to consider in order to manage crises on their campuses effectively. The current literature focuses on the strategies that middle and upper level administrators can use while handling crises in higher education institutions. Most studies discuss the experiences of top leaders in managing crises such as presidents, deans, or student affairs professionals. Additionally, the studies also suggested that charismatic leadership qualities are important for leaders in order to handle crises effectively. When a crisis occurs, top leaders should be in charge of handling the event and involve others in the process. This current literature will be compared to my study’s findings concerning the experiences of female SSAOs in decision making while handling crises on campuses.

Being responsible. Taking charge of making decisions is a common strategy that administrators can use while handling crises on campus. Menghini (2014) in his study of presidents’ experiences and responses to human crises at four-year public institutions in the Midwest examined administrators’ behaviors during crises; focusing on their actions, teamwork, and collaborative performances. He found that, presidents in times of a crisis need to appear as being in charge of dealing with crises. They must perform actions that reflect their roles in protecting the institution. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Karim (2016) who found that charismatic leaders take the lead of the process of handling crisis and have the courage to make decisions.

Making quick decisions. Making decisions in a timely fashion is a fundamental strategy that administrators use during extreme situations. Brennan and Stern (2017) in their study of the role that upper level administrators play when they handle crises on
their campus examined leadership tasks that these leaders perform during and after crises occur. They suggested that top leaders and their subordinates at public universities should make decisions quickly even without having full information about the incident or what they need to do. However, this finding is different from findings acquired by Garcia (2015) who found that SUSs presidents and crisis managers in Florida, mentioned that decision making in times of crises needs to be quick and effective through collecting information from experts. Similarly, Menghini (2014) in his study of presidents’ experiences and responses to human crises at four-year public institutions in the Midwest examined administrators’ behaviors during crises; focusing on their actions, teamwork, and collaborative performances. He found that once a crisis occurs, presidents must be in charge of responding to the incident, collect all information about the crisis, and make quick decisions to minimize the damage.

**One-on-one-consultation.** Consulting with experts is an important strategy in making decisions during a crisis. Research shows that most administrators communicate and consult with experts who are able to provide needed support either on or outside campus (Jacobsen, 2010; Menghini (2014). Menghini (2014) studied presidents experiences on handling crises at four-year institutions in the Midwest and found that the presidents use their networks to consult with administrators to get their feedback on leadership plans. He found that presidents reported they develop broad networks before any crisis happens to get access to important recourses such as human and financial ones so they can use them when a crisis occurs. Networks helped by providing functional support, receiving effective criticism, and offering multiple perspectives.
Communicating during crises. Leaders need to communicate crises situations with individuals inside and outside their institution. Roshan, Warren and Carr (2016) in their study of the usage of social media to communicate crises to stakeholders at organizations in Australia examined how organizations use social media as a tool to interact directly with the public. They found that decision makers at Australian companies communicated with their stakeholders during extreme events through social media such as Facebook or Twitter. They informed the stakeholders about what had happened, minimized their concerns and thanked them for understating the situation. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Brennan and Stern (2017) who suggested that, upper level administrators at public universities need to communicate through social media wisely. They need to use it for their advantage, to assist them in handling the crisis effectively. They should provide quick and effective communication with stakeholders and the public. Similarly, according to Garcia (2015), presidents and crisis managers at SUSs focused on being in touch with each other and with different units during crises. Midlevel administrators need to report all information to their presidents, which finally can increase the safety of their campus.

Collaborative decisions. Leaders should enable other administrators to make decisions. Garcia (2015) found that when a crisis occurs, administrators make many decisions during and after it. Presidents are supposed to make decisions and the administrators in their teams also need to make other decisions. This finding agrees with findings acquired by Menghini (2014) who found that in order for presidents to handle crises effectively at four-year universities, they developed a team of administrators and assigned tasks to every employee. These presidents require each member to perform tasks
based on their skills. The presidents mentioned that, while they involved their team members in performing tasks, they were in charge of making the important decisions.

**Developing policies.** One of the experiences that can help in future decision-making is that the administrators should work to develop policies to prevent similar incidents from happening again. Jacobsen (2010) in his study of leadership styles that administrators use before, during, and after a crisis occurs, examined the challenges that leaders face and strategies that they use while handling crises on campus. He found that administrators or top leaders could use the traditional shared governance in decision-making during this process. After the crisis, these leaders replace their feelings of fear with confidence. Their decision-making will take the form of shared governance to develop policies or plans for preventing similar incidents. This decision-making process can be done in meetings. Administrators form a committee that includes administrators, faculty members, and staff. There would be several meetings for planning, reflecting, and assessing.

**Using networks.** Building networks in advance is an important strategy that helps in making effective decisions while dealing with extreme events. According to Jacobsen (2010), in times of crises, administrators work to gather important resources that the victims need, and knowing professional administrators personally can ease the process of decision-making. Most leaders make the decision to develop networks during stable times and use them in times of crises. These leaders use their professional networks to collect information, gain access to resources, and advocate for the institution during difficult times. This finding is similar to findings acquired by Menghini (2014) who found that networks assisted top administrators to gain access to important recourses.
such as financial assistance and essential administrative information. The presidents also mentioned using their networks to communicate and consult with administrators to get different perspectives about doing things.

**Chapter II Summary**

This chapter discusses what is found in the literature about the role of SSAOs, especially the experiences of females in the workplace. It also includes research about decision-making styles in work environments at higher education institutions during normal days and when a crisis occurs on campuses. This chapter eventually includes the challenges that women face in decision-making as well as major strategies that they use to make effective decisions. Chapter III includes in-depth discussions of the methodology of this study since it explores the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers.
CHAPTER III

METHODODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of 12 female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers, including while handling crises on campus at higher education institutions in the Midwest. The experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers at higher education institutions in the Midwest appear to be an unexplored phenomenon. After conducting a search on these women’s experiences across their careers, I found that this topic appears to be under researched. As I stated earlier in Chapter 1, although women’s presence in top leadership positions at colleges and universities has been growing over the last years, it is still smaller than men’s presence within those positions (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). More female SSAOs are seeking these positions and handling multiple responsibilities that require making effective decisions. These women are also expected to deal with issues that occur on a daily basis, along with larger ones, effectively. Much of the current research concludes that some of these women are still facing gender discrimination (Ballenger, 2010), criticism over the decisions they make (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015), and difficulty finding balance between their personal and professional lives (Guthrie, Woods, Corinne, & Gregoy, 2005). These challenges may put them under pressure and complicate their performances, including the process of decision-making (Spurlock, 2009). There is a need for this study to provide strategies for decision-making that might be beneficial for these women and could add to their competencies. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of female SSAOs who work at higher education institutions in the Midwest.
in making decisions across their careers and during times of crisis in order to understand what challenges they face and the strategies that they use to meet those challenges.

The aim of chapter III is to focus on the methodology that enabled me to respond to the research questions of this study. The overarching question is: what are the experiences of female SSAOs who work in higher education institutions in the Midwest in regards to making decisions across their careers? The sub questions are:

1. How do female SSAOs describe the changes in decision-making experiences across their careers?
2. How do they describe the challenges of decision making in the workplace?
3. How do they describe different strategies of decision making in the workplace?
4. If they believe they have handled a crisis, how do they describe their decision making process while handling a crisis on campus?

This chapter also includes a discussion of the research design, methodological approach, the reflexively of the researcher’s role, and a detailed description of the population, sample, and setting of this study. Lastly, chapter III includes sections for data collection procedure, instrumentation and data description, and data analysis.

**Research Design and Rationale**

In designing this study, I used a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach to abstemiously reflect on the lived experience of human life. According to Van Manen (2014), hermeneutic phenomenology means the reflection on human experiences through interpretation and description of these experiences. This approach works to interpret the lived experiences of humans and help in understanding the way humans make meaning out of these experiences (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 2014). In order for
researchers to explore a phenomenon, they focus on what a group of individuals who lived through an event has in common about their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 2014). Additionally, the phenomenological approach requires researchers to reflect on the lived experiences of individuals as the experiences exist in their conscious mind (Merriam, 2009; Van Manen, 2014). Therefore, researchers’ reflections focused on the essence of a common experience as perceived by participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

A qualitative phenomenological method and design were appropriate for conducting this study because it enabled me to make sense of female SSAOs’ experiences in decision making across their careers. It is appropriate for researchers to use a qualitative study when there is a need to empower the participants to share more of their stories as female SSAOs who deal with decision-making and crises on campus. In addition, many studies that addressed the experiences of female administrators in higher education institutions have used qualitative and phenomenological methods in designing their studies (Cejda, 2008; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregoy, 2005; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Hill & Wheat, 2017; Rogers, 2017; Spurlock, 2009; Treadwell, 2017; Woollen, 2016). The researchers also use a qualitative approach when they need to have a complex understanding of a problem by talking directly with people within their individual context, such as at their home or work (Creswell, 2014). It is appropriate to use a phenomenological method when researchers try to gather the common meanings of the lived experiences of individuals, and when there are limited studies that address that specific problem (Creswell, 2014). After reviewing the literature on female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers, I found that studies focus on the challenges that they face in the workplace in general. However, there are
limited studies that can be found about these women’ experiences in decision-making especially during a crisis at Midwestern institutions. Therefore, the proposed research methodology and design are an appropriate approach to use for this study since they enabled me to extract the experiences of female higher education administrators decision making in times of crises and make sense of them.

In order to capture the essence of participants’ experiences in this study I utilized methods that are important for a qualitative phenomenological approach. I began with using interviews and the techniques of epoche and bracketing (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Van Manen, 2014). Phenomenological researchers use interviews as an essential tool for collecting data. A major part of the phenomenological approach is to connect directly with participants. Moreover, prior to conducting interviews, the researchers reflect on their personal experiences with the phenomena that they are investigating. They become familiar with their assumptions, biases, and views (Merriam, 2009). The techniques of epoche and bracketing are used by phenomenological researchers to set aside their assumptions and biases and hold their judgment on participants’ experiences.

To minimize my bias as a researcher, I reflected on my identity and clarified the assumptions, prejudice, and viewpoints that I had about this study. I discussed my personal background and experiences with this phenomenon. This information helped in setting aside my assumptions and focused more on participants’ experiences. I also considered the general assumptions that have caused me to be interested in this study. The assumptions are that female SSAOs have unique experiences in making decisions throughout their careers specifically when handling crises on campus. I assumed that these women were honest and shared their stories.
Population, Sample, and/or Site

This study focused on female SSAOs at Midwestern higher education institutions; all women who hold the top position of student affairs administration were considered for this study. I chose SSAOs due to their administrative responsibilities that require making important decisions including those used while handling crises on campus (Beavers, 2016). Women have less presence in these positions than men (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014) and research about their experiences is extremely limited. Women in these positions might hold any of the following titles: Chief of Student Affairs Officer, Vice President for Student Affairs, Director of Student Affairs, Vice President for Student Services, Senior Student Affairs Officer, and Dean of Students.

In selecting the sample I used a purposeful sampling technique, in particular, maximum variation and criteria sampling. This type of sampling requires selecting a number of participants who match varied criteria that assist in providing different aspects of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). In this study, my goal was to reach a comprehensive understanding of female SSAOs’ experiences. I chose participants who have a wide range of criteria, which was informative for this study. In addition, I chose participants who met these specific criteria, which were informative for this study. Each participant met four criteria: (a) identified as female, (b) held the position of SSAOs or (equivalent title), (c) worked at a Midwestern higher education institution, and (d) had three to 25 years of experience as SSAOs.

The first criterion was selected due to the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions comparing to men (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014), so men were excluded from this study. The second criterion of selecting the participants who work within the
highest levels of student affairs administration was to ensure that they are involved in making important decisions and they also are responsible for handling crises on campus. Therefore, women who work within the midlevel of student affairs administration were not included. The third criterion was to select female SSAOs who work in all types of post secondary institutions except for women who work at for-profit institutions. This selection could be beneficial due to having similar culture and identity. The fourth criterion was to select only female SSAOs who have been in this position for a minimum of three years and a maximum for 25 years. However, less than three years is not enough time for an institution to have many changes in the positions of SSAOs, so leaders who are in the position for less than three years might not experience changes in all types of decision-making processes (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). In contrast, the experiences of leaders who have more than 25 years working as an SSAO might not be reflective of today’s experiences or these leaders might be retired.

**Participant Recruitment**

When recruiting participants, I employed a gatekeeper and a snowballing technique. A gatekeeper is an individual who is a member of an organization and can provide access to a site and assist with research (Creswell, 2014). I had a connection with one female SSAO and she connected me with informed participants. The gatekeeper in this study is a female Vice President for Student Affairs who has been in her position for over 15 years. Through the division of student affairs, she has had experiences with many administrative services such as budgeting and financial management in addition to supervising the support services for both the division and students. She was qualified to assist in connecting with female SSAOs because she is a member of the National
Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) and knows many Senior Students Affair Officers. She is also a member of the American Council on Education (ACE) in Michigan and has served in a leadership position in the ACE’s Women’s Network for some years. She has many contacts with female executives in leadership positions in the Midwestern region. She introduced me to potential participants by sending emails to explain my research.

The second strategy I used was snowballing technique. Snowballing is a common technique used in purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). This approach is about selecting a few important participants who match the criteria that a researcher sets for his or her study. When a researcher interviews these participants, he or she asks each one to nominate a potential participant for the study (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, I reached out to these participants by using my own personal professional contact. I called and emailed some female SSAOs and invited them to participate in my study. I then utilized snowballing technique to recruit additional participants. This technique is often used when researchers know they have a limited number of participants who meet a given study criteria. Since I initially had limited connections to SSAOs, this approach was helpful when recruiting for the study.

Most studies that addressed the experiences of female administrators included samples that ranged from 5 to 10 participants (Cejda, 2008; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregoy, 2005; Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Hill & Wheat, 2017; Rogers, 2017; Spurlock, 2009; Treadwell, 2017; Woollen, 2016), since most of these studies were able to reach saturation with this sample size, I initially was planning to use a range of 5 to 10 participants for my study. However,
I had the opportunity to reach 12 participants. Saturation is achieved when researchers interview participants without hearing any new information that has been presented in previous interviews (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

This study was participant based and not site based. Interviews were conducted with female SSAOs all over the Midwest. Using several institutions in a large geographical region allowed me to interview more and diverse female SSAOs and had better understanding of their experiences in decision-making across their careers.

Focusing on colleges and universities in the Midwest was important because they have common experiences and identity. Individuals in the Midwest area can have similar beliefs, customs, and processes. According to Kowalewski (2003), American regionalism is an expression of having a strong connection to an area that people acquire due to having shared historical memories and a common definition of values and cultural standards. This connection to the area might make individuals have common interests, values, and beliefs with others so they might have similar descriptions of things. Although female SSAOs may not have been born and grow up in the Midwest area, they live and work in similar environments. Therefore, these women had commonalities of experiences or places. Focusing on Midwestern institutions made a good fit for having women in leadership positions and it was interesting to learn in-depth about their performances in the United States.

**Data Collection Procedure**

One type of data that researchers collect in conducting phenomenological studies is in-depth interviews with semi-structured open-ended questions (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, I had developed an interview protocol or guide. I had created a list of interview
questions, which were semi-structured, open-ended questions. These interview questions had following up with potential prompts to encourage participants to elaborate on their stories. Before I conducted this study, I worked on increasing reliability by conducting a pilot test. According to Creswell (2013), researchers use pilot testing to refine and create research instruments and then assess and implement research procedures. I tested how I set up my study and to what extent my questions were effective. I met with a female student affair administrator who works in Student Conduct and interviewed her. I tested my interview questions and adjusted some questions to be able to gather the needed data.

Before collecting the data, I worked to get important permissions and gained access to the participants. All researchers are required to have permission for conducting their studies and have to gain approved access to participants (Creswell, 2013). This process requires having necessary approval from the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) and then later from the participants themselves (Creswell, 2013). I had permission from HSIRB at Western Michigan University for conducting my study (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, I provided required information and documents to HSIRB such as my study’s details and consent forms (Appendix A).

To begin the process of data collection, I emailed the gatekeeper, who is a female SSAO, and scheduled a meeting with her and asked her to introduce me to the participants. I also scheduled a phone call with my initial personal professional contact, who is a female SSAO, and I emailed her a copy of the brief consent form with the demographic questionnaire so she sent it to each potential participant. Moreover, I used my own personal professional network to contact additional participants. Each interested participant in this study received a copy of a brief consent form with a demographic
questionnaire to sign and fill out (Appendix B). When a female SSAO was interested in participating in my study, she was asked to sign the consent form. She clicked on a link that would direct her to fill the demographic questionnaire.

After I got a response from a female SSAO I determined if she met the criteria for my study. When a participant did not meet the criteria I emailed her a thank you letter and informed her that she would not be in my study. I informed her that the selection process was based on specific criteria and also informed her that her information will be protected and removed (Appendix C). Once a female SSAO met my study’s criteria I emailed her a letter that further explained participation instructions of this study. In this email I informed the female SSAO about participation details such as choosing a pseudonym that represents her personality (Appendix D). I attached a copy of the consent form for her to review and fill in when possible (Appendix E). I asked her to choose what best time, private location, and dates worked best for her convenience and asked her to respond in two days. For participants who did not reply within two days I sent them a reminder email. Prior to the interview date I sent the participant an interview email reminder (Appendix F).

In this study, I conducted a one-on-one interview with each participant. I met the participants who work in institutions that were close to where I live and interviewed them face-to-face. For participants in the area of the state of Michigan when possible I conducted face-to-face interviews. For participants who were out of Michigan I conducted interviews through Skype or phone. I asked the participant for their permission to audiotape their interviews. I emailed the potential participant a copy of the consent form to review, sign, and return. I also emailed the participant a copy of my interview protocol (Appendix G).
Prior to the interview, I introduced myself, provided background information, and explained the reason for doing my study. I informed the participants if they are interested in participating in my study, to sign the consent form before beginning the interview (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of informed consent is for the participant to understand their rights, as well as how the researcher will protect their confidentiality (Creswell, 2013). I also informed the participant that I will record their interviews and I asked for their permission. I passed two copies of the consent form to the participant. I kept one for myself and the other one belongs to the participants. I then read the consent form and gave the form to the participant to read it. I went over it with the participant, and I allowed her to ask questions. I informed the participant that during the interviews there is a risk of remembering some situations that provoke emotional distress so I had to be mindful of that (Merriam, 2009). I informed the participant that they might recall sad or angry memories during the interview. I showed respect for individual’s personality, privacy, and their right to participate in the study (Creswell, 2013). I allowed some time for her to decide if she is going to participate or not. When she was interested I asked her to sign the consent form. Since I was the main researcher, I was professional when dealing with the participants. I met these women in their work environment so I was the guest (Seidman, 2006). I was respectful of the participants, their settings, and views.

I prepared the recording device and started the interview process. The data collection process for this study was to conduct a face-to-face interview when possible, use semi-open-ended questions, record the interviews, and then transcribe the data (Creswell, 2013). I used equipment such as a digital recorder and my computer for
recording the interview. To avoid the risk of losing the data, I used my computer as a second device to record the interviews so I had another version of recording. In order to conduct the interview, I began by talking with the participant to get to know her. I asked the participant the first question and listened to her. I was sure that I looked at her and took some notes. The researcher should develop an interview protocol or guide (Creswell, 2013). Analyzing the data starts during the interviews so the researchers write down a few comments or notes that are relevant to certain parts of the study (Merriam, 2009). I prepared myself for unexpected problems such as the need to leave the interview place. At the end of the interview I asked each female SSAO if she could refer me to another participant who might meet my study’s criteria. I emailed the new participant the brief consent form with the demographic questionnaire and then called her to introduce myself.

Storing the data safely is an important process that researchers need to take into consideration. In order to store the interviews, I protected the audiotapes in a safe device and masked participants’ names (Creswell, 2013). After recording the interviews on a digital recorder and my computer, I transferred the data into a secure external hard disc and put it into a locked place in my home. I also made another copy of the recordings and all transcripts files and transferred them into an external flash memory and kept them in a locked external hard disc in my advisor’s office for almost three years as mandated by HSIRB. I gathered the information and organized them into a master list (Creswell, 2013).

After collecting the data, I transcribed each interview and analyzed it. I emailed each participant and asked her to provide a feedback about my analysis (Appendix H). I sent a copy of my analysis of each participant’s experience and asked her to check the accuracy of my interpretation. When the participant did not respond to me in two weeks I
sent her a reminder email (Appendix I). Later, I reviewed the data, tried to make sense of it, and arranged it into themes (Creswell, 2014). I analyzed the data inductively so the information was reduced into major themes (Creswell, 2013; Foss & Waters, 2007; Merriam, 2009). More importantly I worked to make sure that I conveyed the data accurately by focusing only on the participants’ views (Creswell, 2014). I focused on learning what the experiences mean to the female SSAOs who make decisions and handle crises on campus, not on the literature or my meanings. I conducted my analysis and developed themes. I utilized a peer debriefing strategy to check the accuracy of my study’s procedure and analysis so I worked with (Dr. Mansberger) since she has the knowledge about my study. I ultimately presented my findings and then I developed the discussion section.

**Instrumentation**

In-depth interviews were the tool for collecting the data in this study. I used semi-structured interview with opened-ended questions that were developed to generate responses to research questions (Creswell, 2013). With utilizing semi-structured interviews, the researchers can ask the participants additional questions (Merriam, 2009). In addition, a semi-structured interview is an effective approach as it provides more flexibility. This flexibility occurs when researchers develop simple questions and they are asking questions during the interview. I used in-depth interviews because they were powerful tools for gaining a better understanding of people’s experiences and the meaning that they make (Seidman, 2006).

I utilized in-depth interviews that lasted to 60-90 minutes. It is a tool that enables researchers to allow participants to tell their stories from their conscious so telling the
story is the meaning that they make (Seidman, 2006). Because I did not know most of the participants the interviews required a little bit more time to build rapport. I asked the participant to block one and half hours for the interview to allow time for quick breaks as needed.

Other important qualitative aspects included determining what data I would collect from what participants. This phenomenological study aims to make sense of these women’s experiences of decision-making including in times of crises. It includes also their description of the challenges that they face while making decisions and the strategies that they use. According to Creswell (2014), researchers collect data from the participants who experienced a phenomenon and describe the essence of their experiences. This description is comprised of what and how individuals experienced the phenomenon of this study.

**Interview Protocol**

I had developed an interview protocol to use as a guide during the interviews. The form includes a few semi-structured, open-ended questions that I asked the participants to respond to them (Appendix G). These questions also were adjusted, as the interview process required. Since I analyzed each transcript after I conducted every interview I modified or added some questions that helped in the next interview. This form also has spaces so it enabled me to write some of the ideas about interviewee’s responses, take a few notes, and have closing and thank you statements to determine the interview time (Creswell, 2014).

**Data Analysis**

In this section I provide detailed information about the analysis strategy and the trustworthiness during this process. This process initially began by collecting the data
through interviewing the female SSAOs, recording their responses, and transcribing their interviews. Additionally, all forms of analyzing qualitative particularly in phenomenological design, essentially take an inductive approach (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Riessman, 2008). An inductive approach begins with analyzing raw data into multiple specific themes that are responsive to research questions. Therefore, I analyzed the data inductively.

In analyzing the data, I followed Saldaña’s (2015) processes of coding. These processes include (1) being familiar with the data, (2) developing initial codes, (3) reviewing the transcripts line by line and immersing myself in the data, (4) developing themes, and (5) writing the report. In essence, this process helped by providing an understanding of the participants’ stories by reducing the data into ideas that were concise and significant. It also helped in developing constructs by creating categories or themes (Saldaña, 2013). Therefore, I was able to write a description of the participants’ narratives or experiences (Creswell, 2014). This process of coding initially begins with the first cycle of coding.

The process of analysis began by applying the first cycle of coding. It is a process of coding an interview transcript by using several coding methods (Saldaña, 2013). I initially reflected on my experiences during data collection and during the analysis process and was aware of my influence on the data. After transcribing the interviews, I read through them and commented on my initial thoughts. I then reread the transcripts again in order to begin the coding process. I used multiple coding methods such as attribute coding, value coding, IN VIVO coding, and narrative coding. Attribute coding provided primary descriptions of the essential information about the data and the participants. For
example, it focused on describing the study’s location, demographics of the participants, data format, and time frame. Value coding is a process that assists researchers with presenting the participants’ perspectives or worldviews and reflections on their values, beliefs, and attitudes. Moreover, IN VIVO coding is a process that helps through using the participants’ words. Narrative coding helps researchers present the participants’ stories, especially their interactions with other individuals. Using more than one coding method enables me to provide comprehensive description of the findings (Saldaña, 2013). I was also able to look at the data from different angles. While using multiple coding methods was beneficial, determining the units of data was essential for analysis process.

I began with identifying units of data that were responsive to each of my research questions. A unit of data is any section of the data that the researchers might think of as significant to their study (Creswell, 2013; Foss & Waters, 2007; Merriam, 2009). It might be a word or a long note that illuminates a certain idea that is relevant to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, in order to make sense of these interviews, I identified the units of analysis based on my study’s research questions. For example, one unit of data was any changes in female SSAOs’ experiences of decision-making across their careers. After transcribing the interviews and typing the professional journals into Microsoft Word files, I used a computer program that assisted in the analysis of my data. More specifically, I used the program Dedoose to code and manage the data. Both my interview transcripts and the computer program that I used were essential in the process of coding my data.

In order to code these transcribed interviews, I began by reading the first transcript. As I was reading this transcript, I identified any decision-making experiences of a given
female SSAO and wrote notes or comments in the margins (Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2013). When I looked at a transcript, every time I found information relevant to a female SSAO’s experiences, I highlighted the beginning and the end of the description of these experiences. I located my clusters of relevant data through all the transcripts’ pages. I made many clusters; therefore, it was important to keep track of them. One way to do that is to create a shorthand citation at the end of every cluster that I identified (Foss & Waters, 2007). For example, in order to create certain notations within the clusters I highlighted each transcript page with a different color. I kept doing the same process in each transcript. As highlighting these clusters was important, coding was also essential.

Subsequently I coded the clusters of experiences by reading them and labeling each cluster with a word that summarizes the information within that cluster (Foss & Waters, 2007; Merriam, 2009). For example, one cluster could be called “crisis” to describe any decision-making experience that occurred during a crisis. I then looked across all the transcripts and looked for the clusters or codes that were similar. After doing the first cycle of coding, I began sorting which was about categorizing the codes in order to generate themes (Saldaña, 2013). I chose the similar codes and combined them into groups until I had multiple groups, such as four or five of them (Merriam, 2009). I worked to find connections between the codes. For example, similar codes that describe similar concepts will be linked, even if they appear in different sections of the data. While I was grouping similar codes, I focused only on the most significant patterns (Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2013). After sorting my codes, I advanced to the next step, which was the beginning of the second cycle of coding.
This second cycle of coding includes assigning labels for the categorized groups of codes. These labels will be my themes (Saldaña, 2013). I continued combining these codes until I had many themes. These themes were responsive to my research questions. Through pattern coding I examined the grouped codes by looking for the ones that appeared frequently, or connected conceptually. I also labeled these codes so that there will be multiple themes. Further, I used focused coding to categorize the themes around certain ideas in order to find the relationships among themes. I determined the most frequently appearing themes as well as the most significant ones. Through axial coding I examined the dimensions and features of the themes to explore their connections and also develop subthemes. The theoretical coding aims to discover the core theme of each research question. Therefore, I determined one core theme that was responsive to one research question and then included other subthemes under it.

In this final stage, I wrote up my analysis in Chapter four. I described the essence of female SSAOs’ experiences of decision-making across their careers. I also wrote long paragraphs to explain how and what the participants experience in decision-making (Creswell, 2013). This description includes what they said about their stories and I included examples from their responses. I also used quotations or words from transcripts to support my ideas.

**Trustworthiness**

In order to achieve trustworthiness as a researcher, I used validation strategies for my study. Validation in qualitative studies requires researchers to use accepted procedures to check the accuracy of their research (Creswell, 2013). They should also make sure that their data collection and interpretation processes are trustworthy (Marshall & Rossman,
The accepted procedures I used to validate my study were reflexivity, member check, and peer debriefing.

To maintain integrity while conducting a qualitative study, researchers need to employ a strategy that is called reflexivity. This strategy is about explaining how the researchers influence the process and the findings of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research does not aim to totally eliminate researchers’ values, perspectives, and assumptions (Maxwell, 2013). However, it focuses on understanding how these researchers’ values, perspectives, and assumptions affect the process of research. Researchers need to reflect on their identity, clarify the biases that they bring to the study, and reflect on their role as a researcher (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to reflect on my role as a researcher, I documented my identity and described how my experiences related to female SSAOs’ experiences by using professional journals. This reflection process occurred both at the beginning of my study and then after conducting each interview. Prior to the interviews, I reflected on my past experiences, biases, and assumptions that I had about the female SSAOs’ experiences in the section called Reflections on My Identity. Before and after each interview with the study participants, I recorded my impressions and thoughts regarding their experiences in my professional journal.

The second technique that was used to ensure validation in my study is a member check. A member check technique is that researchers should share the data with the sample individuals to see if they convey what the participants exactly said during the interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After transcribing the interviews, I sent the transcripts to the participants and asked them to check the accuracy
of their information (Newman & Benz, 1998). The other validation strategy that I used was a peer debriefing technique.

The third technique that was utilized to ensure validation in my study was checking with a peer. Peer debriefing technique is an individual who understands my research topic and qualitative methodology so he or she can check the analysis of my data and the study design to see if they are accurate (Creswell, 2013). I discussed the study design and applications as well as analysis with (Dr. Nancy Mansberger) which enabled me to be conscious and not affecting the data by my bias, thoughts, and assumptions. When I analyzed the data, I came up with my themes and used some quotes that I had to share with this individual. Therefore, she checked my work to see if it made sense.

**Reflections on My Identity**

I am a female PhD student who worked closely with a female Dean of Students years ago. My experience with how female SSAOs experience decision-making across their careers is limited. I do not have immediate experiences, but I have limited experiences based on observing a Dean of Students in my previous work. My previous work was as an advisor in student affairs at a Saudi university. Although I am doing my study in the United States, the position of Dean of Students at Saudi universities has a few similar components. As a researcher I reflected on my identity by discussing my personal experiences with the phenomenon that I studied (Creswell, 2013).

In the Saudi higher education system, the majority of institutions have a women’s campus and a men’s campus. There is always a male Dean of Students in the men’s campus and a female Dean of Students in the women’s campus. When a problem happens or a crisis arises on the women’s campuses, the majority of female Dean of Students may
have limited authority to make decisions independently; the male deans in the men’s campus must be involved in the process.

My connections to the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers come from the nature of my work as an advisor in student affairs. Besides working with students and other employees I worked closely with a female Dean of Students at the university. I had the opportunity to observe her behaviors when she made decisions and handled crises. My colleagues and I were sometimes involved in handling crises with her, but not in making regular decisions. Therefore, I have limited experiences in daily decision-making and during the times of crises such as dealing with protesting. I had a situation where a crisis happened that affected a large number of students on campus. This situation involved students’ protesting.

Students protested when they were informed of the time of the final exam. The male administrators from the men’s department called the dean and informed her of the time of the final exam. The final exam was only 8 days before it was due. There was no time for students to prepare and it was a critical exam that affects the GPA. Students were crying, shouting on campus, and taking formal papers from the wall and tearing them up. Other students fainted. This time the dean took charge of the situation and called off the exam. She took the responsibility for what could happen due to her decisions. She also asked me to call the health unit and check students’ conditions to see how they were doing and to calm them down. She immediately called off the exam and then called the men’s department and asked the male employees to delay the exam.

Since I do not have immediate experiences with making decisions as a female SSAO, I hold my judgment on the experiences during the analysis. I listened to the
participants’ responses, asked proper in depth questions, and avoided leading questions (Seidman, 2006). I also learned to hold my judgment about a situation, listened carefully to participants, and developed a deeper understanding of their responses. When I analyzed and presented the findings, I described them as they are without coloring them with my experiences. With my experiences and background in mind, I focused on extracting the participants’ views and avoid shaping the data by my assumptions. In qualitative studies, the researchers interview the participants and make sure that the data is accurate (Creswell, 2013). I also was aware not to engage my background information in the participants’ responses.

Limitations

The primary limitation for this study is that its findings are not generalizable. I chose the phenomenological approach over quantitative method. I also did not use other qualitative approaches because the phenomenological approach was the best methodology that suited my study. Utilizing the phenomenological approach helped me in extracting the experiences from the participants. I chose the sample from the population, which was 12 female SSAOs, who work in colleges and universities in the Midwest region. Therefore, the findings of my study may be relevant only for female SSAOs in the Midwest region and may not be generalizable to other population in different states or regions (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Chapter III Summary

This chapter included a detailed description of the methodology that the researcher utilized to collect data in this study. The primary tool for collecting the data of this study was an in-depth interview to get in-depth descriptions of 12 female SSAOs’ experiences in
decision-making throughout their careers. Chapter IV presents the findings of this study and the analysis of its data.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of 12 female SSAOs who work at higher education institutions in the Midwest in making decisions across their careers and during times of crisis in order to understand what challenges they face and the strategies that they use to meet those challenges. These female SSAOs’ experiences in decision making can be important for other women who seek this position to know what they can go through. The overarching question for this study was: what are the experiences of female SSAOs who work in higher education institutions in the Midwest in regards to making decisions across their careers? The sub questions are:

1. How do female SSAOs describe the changes in decision-making experiences across their careers?
2. How do they describe the challenges of decision making in the workplace?
3. How do they describe different strategies of decision making in the workplace?
4. If they believe they have handled a crisis, how do they describe their decision making process while handling a crisis on campus?

The data of this study was collected through conducting in-depth interviews with each participant. In their responses to the interview questions, the participating female SSAOs discussed their experiences as well as their perspectives of making decisions across their careers. They also described the challenges that they faced and the strategies that they used while handling their work responsibilities.
Data from semi-structured interviews and professional journals was analyzed into themes that were organized by research questions. This chapter focuses on presenting the profiles of the participants and the themes of this study, as well as the summary of the findings.

**Participant Profiles**

The participants in this study were 12 female SSAOs, and I had the opportunity to have this number of participants. All these participants were volunteers with experiences in decision-making as student affairs professionals throughout their careers. This study included participants who were working in Midwestern higher education institutions in the United States. Only a range of years of experiences, and age, as well as the job titles were given in order to keep the identities of the participants private. The colleges and universities were located in 4 states in the Midwest. Eight participants were located in state 1, one participant was located in state 2, two participants were located in state 3 and one participant was located in state 4. Ten of the participants worked in two and four-year public colleges and universities, and two worked in four private colleges and universities. Table 2 explains the participants’ demographics.

The participating female SSAOs held the titles of Dean of Student Services, Dean of Student and Enrollment Services, Vice President for Student Development and Dean of Students, Assistant Vice President/Dean of Students, Vice President and Chief Student Affairs Officer, Dean of Students, Senior Associate Vice President and Dean of Students, Vice President for Student Affairs and Strategic Initiatives, Vice President for Student Affairs, and Associate Vice Chancellor/Dean of Students. Tables 1 and 2 explain the participants and institutions’ demographics respectively.
Table 1: Participants’ Demographics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SSAOs’ Demographics Distribution</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<tr>
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<td>46 – 55</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Details of Female SSAOs’ Institutions Demographics</td>
<td>Types of Institutions</td>
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**Anne Word 1** was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for between 10 and 25 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 46 and 55 years old, and she had a doctoral degree. She had nearly 15 years of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a small private institution in the Midwest located in State 1. Prior to being an SSAO, she held multiple positions at different private institutions. Initially working in Admissions and Financial Aid, she also worked as an academic advising and lastly became the Associate Dean of Students at that same institution. Anne Word had similar decision-making experiences across her career as an SSAO. During her early years in this position, she focused on learning the culture and the history of her institution and how things worked. She was making decisions
collaboratively through seeking input from people who had authority around her, such as staff, administrators, and presidential cabinet members. When she made a decision, she involved/consulted with the people who were legally required to be involved in that decision. She found making decisions that did not align with the institution’s policies very challenging, which made her rethink such policies. For example, when she wants to handle a problem or situation that has no polices for it, she questions the institution’s polices and works to adjust them. Before making bigger decisions, she focused on being informed as much as possible. She asked many questions and thought about the impact of her decisions on students and the entire institution. She also regulated her emotions when she made decisions in complicated situations. For instance, she had a student who took his own life in his apartment off-campus. Although it was a painful situation to deal with, she was able to make all necessary decisions to handle this incident effectively.

Becky 2 was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for between 3 and 10 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 35 and 45 years old, and she had a doctoral degree. She had nearly 8 years of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a public institution in the Midwest located in State 3. Prior to being an SSAO, she held multiple positions; she worked in the residence life, then she was a special Assistant to the VP, the Assistant to Dean of Students, and the Assistant Dean of Students at her institution. In the beginning she was not confident in her ability to handle work responsibilities. She stated that, “So I was still nervous about it, I remember going to my first dean’s meeting and I was around the table with a bunch of academic deans…. I remembered I was like what I have done sitting around this table of all men, I do not belong here, not only I do not belong but also because I am a woman in
a men’s state but I do not belong, because I was just only the dean of students and these are all the academic deans. So definitely I had insecurities and some lack of confidence when I first started”. Now she has become confident in handling work responsibilities; she is engaged in making large scale and impactful decisions, such as developing strategic planning and suspending students. She became confident in her interaction with her boss and she has had her team support her since the beginning. When handling work responsibilities, she was faced some challenges in making decisions. For example, making large-scale decisions such as transferring an employee can be extremely difficult for her as well as for the other person. She has been able to balance her family and work life due to having an effective support system. She recommended other female SSAOs believe in themselves and be confident to make the right decisions. She took her work seriously by doing what is best for students’ success. During a crisis situation, she became in charge of making decisions and contacting the appropriate people and doing what it takes to handle those crises effectively.

**Ella 3** is a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She is between 46 – 55 years old, and she has a doctoral degree. She had been in the position for between 3 to 10 years. She had 8 years of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a public institution in the Midwest located in State 1. Prior to being SSAO, she was the Director of Student Conduct, and then she was the Associate Dean of Students. Ella’s decision-making style did not change drastically over the years because she was appointed as an SSAO in her home institution. Therefore, she did not face as much pressure from her colleagues during her early years in the position. She had experiences from her last position as the Associate Dean of Students, which she utilized in her new role. When she wanted to
make decisions, she focused on making high quality decisions. She collected the best information about a given situation and then consulted with her colleagues inside and outside the institution. Ella has realized that she now makes decisions quicker than when she first became an SSAO. She has become more understanding of administrators and staff’s decisions when they have different opinions from hers. In regards to the challenges that she faced, due to being in this top position, stakeholders perceived her as the only person who could help them make decisions. Administrators and people from different units on campus came to her to make decisions about their concerns and advocate for them to other upper level administrators. Due to the fact that she had a female supervisor, she did not face issues in regards to her gender. She had the privilege of being included in important decisions, and her input was valued. Her voice was heard for major changes. She mentioned that having good relationships with her colleagues was a great strategy that she used while making decisions. She developed networks with other female SSAOs outside her institution especially with those who have similar experiences as hers. When a crisis occurred, she made all the decisions by delegating tasks to employees and contacting the appropriate individuals for handling each incident.

**Flint 4** was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for between 10 and 25 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 56 and 65 years old, and she had a doctoral degree. She had nearly 19 years of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a public institution in the Midwest located in State 4. Prior to being an SSAO, she received her education from and worked for the same institution. She had a master’s degree. She was fortunate to be in her institution more than two decades so she studied and worked in the same place. She also had deep knowledge about the
institution’s culture and she made decisions based on her values and principles. In addition, she reported that her decision making experience did not significantly change across her careers. She also cared for people within her institution so she built trust with them and sought their input about decisions. Before she made a decision on a large scale she thought of how this decision may impact students, employees and the entire institution. Although she had many experiences within the institution, she faced some challenges. She found hiring inexperienced graduate professionals into entry-level positions could be challenging due to them having limited experiences and an inability to handle work responsibilities. She also found that most top-level positions are occupied with men and less people of color, which may limit young students’ opportunity to learn or experience diversity. In order for her to make a change in the campus community, she focused on the quality of the decisions she made. She focused on seeking input from all people and she listened to usual and unusual voices on her campus. She thought of the impact of the decision on people as well as the financial aspects of it. She also handled severe crises on campus. For instance, a female student took her own life in a sorority house, which affected many students on campus. Therefore, Flint did necessary processes of contacting people with authority such as law enforcement, and managing her team members. She worked on preparing the funeral, checking on students who were affected, and communicating with the campus community.

Kay 5 was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She has been in the position for between 10 and 25 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 56 and 65 years old, and she had a doctoral degree. She had nearly 25 years of experience in the field of student affairs and as an SSAO. She worked at a public institution in the
Midwest located in State 1. Prior to being an SSAO, she held multiple positions at different higher education institutions. She worked in Conduct, Orientation, and oversaw the University Center. She held the Associate Dean of Students position and was the Dean of Students for some time. Kay had different decision-making experiences throughout her career as an SSAO. In the beginning of her careers, when Kay wanted to make a decision she focused more on what is best for students. She thought a lot about what students’ want and what they would like on campus versus what they actually need. But now she thinks more of different aspects of her decisions. She stated that, “Now I take into consideration much more [of] the economics of it, the look of it, and the risk of it... I take that into consideration much more now”. In addition, she makes decisions quicker than she used to due to developing confidence in her interactions with people. She consults with appropriate employees and keeps stakeholders informed of important decisions before she decides. In the beginning of this role, Kay found the interaction with some employees was a little bit difficult because they were her peers before she became an SSAO and now she is their supervisor. Only one employee was not happy with reporting to her, but she worked with him through transparency and effective communication. She also had effective interactions with the majority of the employees. She stated that, “So I think that’s been fine for my direct reports as far as the academic deans on campus, I worked with them very closely as [an SSAO] because I have academic issues with students so they all know me I have been working with them for years. So it was not difficult at all”. Now she is highly confident in her interactions with all stakeholders in particular the president and vice presidents. Regarding the challenges that she faces while making decisions, she faced some difficulty while handling her work
responsibilities. She found making large-scale decisions very difficult. When she wants to decide on a matter at the institutional level she needs to consider several aspects. She needs to listen to all appropriate voices and consider the institution’s polices and budget and then build a consensus and collaborate. Moreover, she faced what is referred to as “Old boy’s club” where some male administrators go out for male activities and then discuss and decide on matters related to their institution without seeking female SSAO’s input. Regarding the strategies that she uses while making decisions, she mentioned that she utilized several approaches that help her to make effective decisions. For instance, she always goes to meeting prepared to make effective decisions. She always supports her decisions with facts through doing research in multiple sources and data. Lastly, in terms of handling crises on campus, she deals with the situation independently and makes all necessary decisions. She contacts the appropriate individuals and delegates tasks to the employees.

Kerry Persons was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for between 3 and 10 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 35 and 45 years old, and she had a doctoral degree. She had nearly a decade worth of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a small private institution in the Midwest located in State 2. Prior to being an SSAO, she held multiple positions; she worked as a director of Resident Life, then she was the Assistant to Dean of Students, and then the Dean of Students at her institution. Kerry Persons came to this role with solid administrative experience that enabled her to make decisions effectively. She is used to making rational decisions independently, but she consults with her team members when she needed additional input on the decisions she was making. She now makes decisions
fast because she learned more about how to handle work responsibilities. She gained more self-confidence and earned trust from the university presidential cabinet. However, Kerry Persons faced some challenges such as the difficulty of making large-scale decisions and not feeling included while working with some divisions or projects that were male dominant. In order to make effective decisions, she worked to define a problem and strategize what she wanted to accomplish. She sought input from colleagues who were knowledgeable and trustworthy. She recommended overcoming fear through being in charge of a situation and taking responsibilities for the decisions that were made. She made important decisions on a daily basis and during a campus crisis. In the crisis she experienced, one of the students went to a bar near to her institution and engaged in altercation with people. In the altercation one person died and another was injured. She was in charge of handling this situation and she contacted people with authorities such as local police. She contacted the victims’ families and communicated with the public.

**Linda** was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for between 3 and 10 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 35 and 45 years old, and she had a Master’s degree. She had nearly 5 years of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a public institution in the Midwest located in State 2. She held multiple positions prior to being an SSAO. She worked as a director of the foundation, a director of the admissions, and then the Associate Dean of Students. In the beginning of being an SSAO, she was consumed with worries about how to make decisions and was not confident about what she was doing. She focused on keeping everyone happy around her, but thought deeply about how her decisions affect students. Now she has become aware of how to manage her emotions and make decisions based on gathering data. She
has worked in a social manner in which the employees are involved in making decisions that require their participation. When she has handled work responsibilities she has faced multiple challenges. She found it difficult to make decisions without hurting everyone’s feelings. She also found it difficult to balance her family and work life due to meeting the demand of this position. As she was faced with challenges she used effective strategies that allowed her to enhance workflow. She seeks seek others’ perspectives and think deeply about the reasons behind it. She stated that women should not be afraid to do the right thing, especially during complicated situations. Although she was blessed with not facing a crisis on her campus, she thought of a crisis as an action or something severe that would disrupt the workflow in her institution.

Mary Lewis was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for between 3 and 10 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 35 and 45 years old, and she had a doctoral degree. She had nearly 4 years of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a public institution in the Midwest located in State 1. Prior to being an SSAO, she held multiple positions; she worked in the admissions office and then she was the Assistant to the Dean of Students at her institution. Mary Lewis mentioned that in order to make effective decisions she needed to be extremely flexible when dealing with people in order to keep them interested in her thoughts and visions. When she first started in the position, she spent a lot of her time thinking about how her decisions may impact students in positive or negative ways. Furthermore, when she wanted to make a decision, she considered what was best for the students and how the university could meet their needs. In regards to handling her work responsibilities, she felt that she did not have enough experience, which made it difficult
for her at the beginning. However, she worked harder to grow as a professional and prove to her supervisors that she was capable of doing her job. She built professional relationships with other deans in her institution and strengthened her interaction with administrators and staff. She then consulted with them and incorporated their input, which eventually enabled her to be more confident when making decisions. In regards to challenges that she faced, she reported that in some cases some male colleagues would make decisions at the institutional level and then inform her about it afterward. Additionally, male administrators sometimes made decisions within her area of expertise without seeking her input. She thought that women in leadership positions needed to demonstrate their worth in a balanced way. Female leaders need to be highly assertive about their decisions, but also be careful not to come across as very aggressive. She was eager to make decisions effectively, but before she made a decision she would collect information and be sure to consider every outcome. She reported that her university had a safe campus; she was fortunate not have any major crises on her campus, so she had no experiences in handling severe incidents. However, she mentioned that she felt prepared for handling a crisis if one did occur and would be comfortable making necessary decisions.

**Paula 9** was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for between 10 and 25 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 56 and 65 years old and she had a doctoral degree. She had nearly 20 years of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a public institution in the Midwest located in State 1. Prior to being an SSAO, she held multiple positions such as Assistant to Dean of Students, Dean of Students, Associate Vice President and Dean of Students, and Intern Vice President of
Students Affairs at different public institutions. During her early years as an SSAO, Paula worked to get others’ perspectives before making decisions, and her decision making style stayed the same over the years. She worked collaboratively with her colleagues such as deans, administrators, department heads, and staff. She included her colleagues in her decision-making process when the decision required their involvement. While she was a dean of students and during her first years as an SSAO, she used to face what is referred to as the “Good old boys” club. She was left out of making important decisions; men would make the decisions without her input and then inform her afterwards. She also focused on building relationships and consulting with others, but people perceived her collaborative style as a weakness. They also viewed her nice attitude as another sign of weakness. However, over time she no longer faced these issues of gender discrimination in her position because she stood for her rights, and men are becoming more understanding of women holding leadership positions. For example, a male administrator sexually harassed her, and she documented the situation and confronted the administrator. With time, male administrators currently in her workplace are more acceptable of seeing women in leadership positions and they support her highly. In regards to strategies that helped her with making decisions, she would learn from mentors, develop conflict resolution skills, and consult with the appropriate people. She mentioned that crises on campus can be events such as student suicide, pipes failing in buildings, and campus shootings. When a crisis occurred, she made all of the decisions by involving the appropriate authorities, delegating tasks to her employees, and then communicating details of the events to the public.

Rose 10 was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. Rose was
between 35 – 45 years old and had a PhD. She had one year of experience as an SSAO, but she held multiple administrative positions within the unit of student affairs for over 8 years. She also had expertise in finance and administrative work, which enabled her to uniquely relate to the experiences of other female SSAOs. She worked at a public institution in the Midwest located in State 3. Prior to being an SSAO, she worked in different positions such as a Coordinator for Student Conduct, and an Assistant Dean of Students. In regards to past decision-making experience, Rose focused on learning how things worked in her institution through listening to the people around her. She responded to urgent tasks by using information and logic. Her decision-making experiences did not change a lot, except that she learned how to improve her methods to make decisions that fit with this new institution’s requirements and polices. She was working in a different institution and then she was hired as an SSAO in the new institution. Rose faced challenges, for instance, some academics did not collaborate with her because they did not understand the value of student affairs’ work. She also found it difficult to balance her work and family life. In order to overcome those challenges, she worked with integrity and transparency to build effective relationships and strive for students’ development. She had a student who committed suicide on her campus. Therefore, she faced a crisis on campus, and she handled the situation immediately through contacting the students’ family, contacting the proper authorities, and communicating with the community.

**Sheryl** was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for between 10 and 25 years. At the time of the interview, she was between 56 and 65 years old, and she had a doctoral degree. She had nearly 25 years of
experience in the field of student affairs and as an SSAO. She worked at a public institution in the Midwest located in State 1. Prior to being an SSAO, she held multiple positions at different higher education institutions. Initially working in Housing as a hall director, she also worked in the Dean of Students’ office, and worked with the Title 9 coordinator. She held the Associate Dean Position and then later was the Dean of Students for some time. Sheryl had different decision-making experiences across her career as an SSAO. In the beginning of her role Sheryl made decisions based on logic and collected information before making any decision. Now she uses the same approach of decision-making but she is more confident in making these decisions quickly. Her interactions with employees were effective, since she started as an SSAO and have stayed the same. Once Sheryl received this position she learned a lot of necessary information about her institutions’ policies, history, and the stakeholders. She valued the contribution of people who were on this campus before she got there, she noted that, “I’ve trained to really value the contribution of the people who really came before [me] and [particularly] when I looked back to ten years later”. Regarding the challenges, she noted that making decisions at the institutional level could be difficult particularly when financial resources are limited. For instance, when she wants to make a decision and consider input from people with competing interests it can be difficult to reach a consensus. Moreover, she faced difficulty balancing her work/family life due to the fact that meeting this role’s demands was overwhelming. She also faced gender discrimination behaviors, she reported that,” I think the gender piece of the [SSAO] role and being student centered, if you are not careful and you are a woman in this role, people can attribute what you are doing as a student centered [advocate as], “oh you are mothering the students” or things
that they would never say about a man, who is student centered, in the role making the same decisions. I also have always looked younger than [my age] so I am always conscious that I am walking into a meeting with senior cabinet members and I look young and I am going to be talking about what is the best interest of students. So I always felt the pressure to dress professionally and be really prepared and I think sometimes my male counterparts do not experience that.” Regarding the strategies that she utilized while making decisions, she mentioned that making effective decisions and being competent administrator are significant. She noted that it is always important for female SSAOs to do their homework before going to a meeting in order to make valid and high quality decisions. She also reported that in order to be taken seriously she must support her decisions with facts, be in charge of her work, and be able to defend her decisions. During a crisis situation, she noted that she focuses on being in charge of handling the situation. She makes all important decisions, contacts appropriate people, and informs the public about the incident.

**Taylor 12** was a female SSAO, and she was a European American. She had been in the position for 3 to 10 years. Taylor was between 35 – 45 years old and had a master’s degree. She had five years of experience as an SSAO. She worked at a small public institution in the Midwest located in State 1. Prior to being an SSAO, she held multiple positions at her institution, such as Admission/College Life Rap, and then became the director of Academic Advising and Student Life. When Taylor first became an SSAO, she felt that decision-making was chaotic because no clear policy existed, and she was only able to react to situations on campus. While making decisions, she had limited interaction with the administrators within her institution because she was not accepted as
a dean due to her gender. Additionally, some female administrators did not accept her as their boss. She faced issues with what is referred to as the “Good old boys” club. For example, male administrators would make some decisions on their own authority and then inform her after. As she held the position longer, she became more confident in making decisions effectively. She also became proactive by developing multiple policies and knowing when and how to react to situations on campus. She faced less issues with those who did not support her authority as dean. She thought of women as less supportive of each other as they move up to higher positions, and she described them as competitive. For example she vocalized her perception of the competitive attitude of women as the following: “That I should not support you and see you as a part of my support network, I should see you as competition. And so I am going try to beat you to the finish line.”

Some of the leadership strategies that she used were to makes decisions based on policies and facts. When she wanted to make a decision about a situation, she implemented the policies of her institution and collected enough information about the situation. She made hard decisions that were based on facts, not feelings, and were based on what was the best for the students and administrators. However, she also worked to become diplomatic and learn how to deliver hard decisions to people without affecting their emotions negatively. She also mentioned that crises on campus can escalate in different levels such as fighting among people, firing an employee, and campus shootings. When crises occurred on campus, she made almost all of the decisions on her own while balancing her emotions. Then, she would call campus administrators to communicate what she wanted them to do in their role.
Presentation of Themes

The results of this study were based on the research questions presented in the previous section. Interviews from every participant were analyzed to result in different themes, sub-themes, and emergent elements. The following section will describe these findings. The results were obtained by utilizing Dedoose software. The professional journals were typed and the interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word files. All data was placed in the Dedoose software to be coded and managed properly. After analyzing this data, five themes, 20 subthemes, and 26 emergent elements were generated and presented in Table 3. Quotes from the interviews were utilized to support the findings. The grammar of these quotes was edited for clarity and all names were changed to keep the participants’ identities confidential.

Table 3: Summary of Results

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<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<th>Sub-Theme</th>
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<th>Emergent Idea</th>
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<td><strong>Female SSAOs’ Experiences</strong></td>
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### Table 3—Continued

2. **The Changes in Decision-Making Across Female SSAOs’ Careers.**

   **Question 2:** How do female SSAOs describe the changes in decision-making experiences across their careers?

   **A. Making Decisions in the Beginning of Being an SSAO**
   - Feeling Alone: 1
   - Feeling Supported: 2
   - Being in Charge of Making Decisions Based on Consultations: 12
   - Making Decisions Based on Thinking and Logic: 12

   **B. Making Decisions During Early Years**
   - Being in Charge of Making Decisions Based on Consultations: 12
   - Making Decisions Based on Thinking and Logic: 12

   **C. Making Decisions Now**
   - Becoming More Confident to Be in Charge of Making Decisions: 12
   - Participative Decision Making When Necessary: 12
   - Making Decisions Based on Facts and Logic: 9
   - Building Trust and Gaining More Responsibilities: 7

3. **The Challenges Female SSAOs Faced in the Process of Decision Making.**

   **Question 3:** How do they describe the challenges of decision making in the workplace?

   **A. Difficulty Making Large Scale Decisions**
   - 9

   **B. Workplace Political Challenge**
   - 9

   **C. Challenge of Balancing Work and Family Life**
   - 7

   **D. Facing Gender Discrimination Behaviors**
   - 7
Table 3—Continued

4 **The Strategies Female SSAOs Used in the Process of Decision Making.** Question 4: How do they describe different strategies of decision making in the workplace?

A. Learning the Importance of Supporting Decisions with Evidence 12

B. Being Unafraid to Take Ownership for Making Decisions and Taking Risks 8

C. Receiving Personal Support by Creating Work-Life Balance 6

D. Learning to Overcome Gender Discrimination While Handling Work Responsibilities 6

E. Learning How to Deal with Workplace Politics Including Problematic Employees 4

5 **Handling Crises on Campus**

Question 5: If they believe they have handled a crisis, how do they describe their

A. Crises on Campus 1

1. Student Death on/off Campus 12

2. An Incident Resulting in Severe Damage to Facilities 7

3. Active Shooting on Campus 6
Research Question 1

The research question that led to the emergence of the “Female SSAOs’ Experiences” theme was, “What are the experiences of female SSAOs who work in
higher education institutions in the Midwest in regards to making decisions across their careers?” When asked to describe this position including their experiences of decision-making, the participating female SSAOs talked about their role and responsibilities and discussed effective skillsets that they used while handling work tasks.

This theme is categorized into two sub-themes: 1) Female SSAOs in the Workplace, and 2) Female SSAOs’ Decision Making Skills.

**Sub-theme 1: Female SSAOs in the workplace.** This sub-theme includes each participant’s description of the large-scale role of SSAOs and the wide range of responsibilities that they handle within their workplace. Two elements emerged from their description of this role: 1) Role description, 2) SSAOs’ Responsibilities.

**Emergent Element 1.1.1—Large SSAO role.** All participants noted that they supervise many different areas within Student Affairs or in their institution as well as supervise large number of people.

**Rose.** My responsibility is to oversee Student Disability Services, The Office of Community Standards, Title 9, Orientation, New Student Programs, as well as family and parents programs. I supervise that entire area and I have about 75 staff, full-time staff, student staff, and graduate staff.

**Flint.** So in student affairs on this campus which have a number of departments about half of these departments report to me. So part of my responsibility is to help provide leadership for our students' recreation center, housing, our students' union, counseling center, health center, and a center for students' involvement.

**Linda.** I am in charge of students enrollment services and I oversee our student success center where we are offering tutoring and counseling and the admissions
and recruiting processes, career services, student conduct, student advocacy, and I am also the registrar.

_Kerry Persons._ So you know lots of the things that have to do with the students outside a classroom experience, including our counseling and health services, we have a wellness center, campus safety, residence life, student orientation, and student involvement program, commuter student services, multicultural affairs, faith and actions (which is our campus ministry program), and career development falls into my portfolio.

_Emergent Element 1.1.2—Wide range of responsibilities within the role of SSAOs._ All SSAOs participants handle responsibilities that deal with legal issues, representing their institution in a court or in external community, promoting diversity, managing crisis on campus, playing financial roles, advocating for students, inspiring a shared vision, meeting with the Board of Trustees on campus, and developing policy.

_Anne Rose._ It's pretty common for people in student affairs in many ways to be threatened with legal action. It happens with some frequency. [Students or parents or anyone] They say, “I am going to talk to my lawyer” and I say, “Ok feel free to do that. I will give you our attorney's name.” They can contact our attorney if they need to.

_Paula._ So the Vice President and I were in a courtroom in a city in the Midwest to defend the university. And what happened is we amended our policies and had a whole plan about how we are going to better educate the entire campus community so [that situation] did not happen again.

_Becky._ And I also serve as the main liaison to a city in the Midwest on behalf of
the division of student affairs. It is kind of the town-gown relationship to the police department with our code enforcement with our Mayor’s office, so I am the one who kind of does those types of relationships.

Anne Rose. And I'm also, as part of my [SSAO] role I do the crisis management, but I am also involved in making long-term budget decisions and long-term policy decisions for the institution. I meet with the Board of Trustees when they are on campus.

Rose. And I am the Chief of Student Advocacy on campus and I am ultimately responsible for the leadership direction, vision, and strategy for these areas.

Sub-theme 2: Female SSAOs’ decision making skills. This sub-theme includes each participant’s description of a variety of skillsets that are used in this role including the interaction with people and the ability to make decisions. Four elements emerged from their description of these skillsets: 1) Skills in Interpersonal Communication, 2) The Ability to Prioritize, 3) Adherence with State and Federal Law, and 4) Being Flexible.

Emergent Element 1.2.1—Skills in interpersonal communication. Seven of the participating female SSAOs described effective interaction with people as an important skill for work progress and it can be achieved through approachability, transparency, and conflict resolution.

Anne Word. So I think that interpersonal skills are essential as is the ability to interact with different types of people, in a respectful way, in a curious way. And I think a sense of humor is essential. If you don’t have a sense of humor you may as well go home. Just too much hard stuff happens, honestly.

Flint. I think another skillset is what I am going to call “approachability”, I think
it is always a problem in any sort of hierarchal setting when people report to somebody. No matter how much trust you build there is always a little bit of uhm..doubt just about how honest you can be. I will use my direct report as an example about how honest they can be with me about our relationship. My attendance in their areas, the way that I work with them, and how honest they can be with me. So I spend a fair amount of time building those relationships and just using the word by saying straight up. “You can say anything to me. I will never hold a grudge, it is not going to come back to haunt you, our goal is always to make progress”.

*Paula.* Sometimes all the people that are working closely with students have to learn how to manage those interpersonal conflicts. Because students today, many of them, do not have the skills to manage conflict. They have lived on their phones, they have learned to speak up about what they do not like via text or Instagram or whatever they use, not have face-to-face. So learning to have face to face interactions and learning how to speak your mind and in ways that do not violate someone else and having that kind of civil discourse is an important skill set. I think student affairs professionals need to know how to help students do that so they have to be able to do that themselves. And so I can tell you that many staff are not comfortable with that too. They do not necessarily know how to manage conflict so you got help your staff to have the skills so they can help students have the skills.

*Emergent Element 1.2.2—The ability to prioritize.* Eleven of the participants noted that they focused on what is important in addition to considering what is essential
for making an effective decision such as decisiveness, and absorbing and processing
information quickly to make a high quality decision.

**Anne Rose.** Then another skill set is to be able to take in a lot of information
quickly and be able to focus on the heart of the heart of the thing. In any
situation, in any given circumstance, you get a lot of relevant information and a
lot of information that's not quite as relevant so being able to peel away and focus
on “Okay, this is the relevant stuff, not all the other stuff around it”.

**Becky.** I can be very decisive in a crisis and I have kind of a neat sense of what to
do like I am a good problem solver. So I think that is also a skill set that I bring to
the table so that’s what other people would tell you about me.

**Ella.** I would say the skillsets that I have found are most important are patience.
Being able to focus on what the current issue is and understanding all of the
aspects of that issue in terms of decision-making.

**Emergent Element 1.2.3—Adherence with state and federal law.** Seven of the
participants stated that understanding and applying the federal law while making
decisions is a skill set that is important for work flow and protecting their institutions.

**Anne Rose.** Another important skill set is to be able to be conversant with legal
requirements, there are a lot of things around students’ privacy, compliance with a
lot of federal regulations related to Title 9… to financial aid…to student
athletes… to pick anything. So another important skill set is to be as
knowledgeable as I can about those external guidelines, requirements, and laws.

**Tylor.** My Higher Ed law book is right there. I use it frequently, anything with
Higher Ed law book, decisions that I make and things that we do, I cannot put the
institution at risk. We have been through a handful of lawsuits since I have been here and so keeping up with and maintaining knowledge of higher ED law is an important skill.

Paula. We have to have a good understanding of legal issues because we are living in such a litigious society now. There are a lot of things that happen in Student Affairs that have inherent risks attached to them. To give you an example, today I am reading the final appeal for a Title 9 case. A student has appealed his suspension and I'm reviewing that case and so whatever my decision is, it is the final decision for the university and his attorney is the one that wrote the appeal letter so I'm reading an appeal letter written by an attorney and I’ve got to respond to it. I will not do that by myself, I will have the [institution] attorney to look at the letter and make sure that I am responding in a way that does not leave [the institution] in a bad place. So I have to know enough to know when I need legal counsel to support what I'm saying or doing. So Student Affairs works very closely with the Office of General Counsel because again there is just risk involved.

Emergent Element 1.2.4—Being flexible. Ten of the participating SSAOs described the importance of the flexibility as a skillset for making decisions that can be achieved through being dependable and collecting data to support decisions, which can have a positive impact on their performances.

Becky. I am also incredibly adaptable, I do not let things if I have things rattle me, so if I have a certain plan for the day if a crisis happened or something is going on like that it is not a big of a deal, I will focus on my crisis and I do not have a lot of
anxiety over the work that was left behind. So I am pretty adaptable and flexible in that way.

Kay. Even when I do not consult with the executive team, I just know that they know me well enough to trust me. And so that has been a big factor in making me feel good about maybe making some tough decisions, because I know that they are not going to question me unless I really screwed up, in general, they are going to trust me that I am making the right decision.

Research Question 2

The research question that concentrated on “The Changes in Decision-Making Across Female SSAOs’ Careers” theme was, “How do female SSAOs describe the changes in decision-making experiences across their careers?” This theme is categorized into three sub-themes: 1) Making Decisions in the Beginning of Being an SSAO, 2) Making Decisions During Early Years, and 3) Making Decisions Now. These sub-themes include a discussion of the experiences of female SSAOs while making small or large scale decisions including a description of their interactions with individuals in their institutions when they first came to this position until now.

Sub-theme 2.1: Making decisions in the beginning of being an SSAO. This subtheme describes female SSAOSs’ different experiences in regards to the changes in making decisions experiences in the beginning of their role as an SSAO. Some participants noted that they felt alone due to being new to their institution and being isolated and being the only woman while the other reported that they were supported by the employees. Their experiences can be divided into a couple of emergent elements: 1) Feeling Alone, and 2) Feeling Supported.
Emergent Element 2.1.1—Feeling alone. Eight of the participating female SSAOs described their experiences of decision making when they first came to the position of SSAO as being alone and nervous or fearful.

**Linda.** It was a little bit intimidating, and I questioned all of my decisions and then I was worried that I was not qualified. And I tried harder than I should have to keep all individuals involved in all situations happy so initially, that was a concern of mine.

**Tylor.** I feel like I was very chaotic. I think because there were a lot of assumptions that I made coming into this position that I thought certain things were in place. For example, in the first year of me being in this position, I had hired an individual and we had major personnel problems with this person. The individual was not just performing poorly but unethically. And so coming into the position, I assumed that there were like human resources protocols or coaching guides or something that existed that would help me to try to move this individual either to perform better and make ethical decisions v.s unethical decisions, and I quickly realized that none of that existed.

**Kerry Person.** When I joined the president’s cabinet, I was the only woman and I was still in my mid to later thirties, so I’ve been the youngest person in the cabinet by quite a bit. For a long time I worked for a vice president who left the institution for a presidency. So I reported to the same person for a long time and that person was a mentor and sponsor. When she left that no longer existed in the institution. I was pretty overwhelmed. But oh.. I was pretty overwhelmed with uhm what it meant to have a different set of peers, in my cabinet colleagues. And
what it meant to lead a division and to think you know on a daily basis institutionally as opposed to just to about student affairs.

**Emergent Element 2.1.2—Feeling supported.** Six of the participants noted that they sought support from people within their institutions and they received it. When they made a decision, they had employees’ support their decisions because these women had gained experiences from last positions and/or having good relationships with their peers, staff, deans, and upper level administrators.

*Paula.* It was actually wonderful when I started because my staff all knew me, they were very supportive of me getting the job, so when the president was the one that appointed me, my staff always were so excited which made me feel good. Because, if you walk and know you have the support of the people that are going to be working with you and for you, it's a big difference. So I felt like I came into the role with a lot of support, which is very good. And I had support across the campus so people in other unit areas were really excited when I got the job.

*Becky.* I was confident in my interaction with my boss. So like my supervisor, the vice president who is the president who hired me, I felt very confident and very supported. And I also felt very good about my team in the Dean of Student Office.

**Sub-theme 2.2: Making decisions during early years.** This sub-theme includes each participant’s description of making decisions as well as interacting with the employees which occurred by being in charge of handling work tasks, focusing on building relationships, and relying heavily on logical thinking. A couple of emergent elements described how female SSAOs experienced decision-making: 1) Being in Charge of Making Decisions Based on Consultations, and 2) Making Decisions based on
Thinking and Logic.

Emergent Element 2.2.1—Being in charge of making decisions based on consultations. All the participating female SSAOs reported that they started their approach of making decisions by improving relationships with people in their institution by having one on one conversations and constant consultation with them.

Rose. First thing I tried to do was to support my staff and my team. You have to earn their trust by working very hard, showing up, I am kind of going the extra mile for them. In the first year, I just attended everything I could to meet as many people as I could to build trust and build relationships.

Kay. I met with every person individually when I first started because I wanted them to know who I was, I did not want them to just go with what they heard if they saw me on campus and that was it. I sat down with every person for an hour, and I did an information interview with him or her. I asked them what is the best thing about working here, and it was all very positive. I did not ask them what was the worst thing, I got some of that of course, but I did more of a positive interview, and from that we did some strategic planning based on what I heard from them. But that was not the most important thing to me; the most important to me was having face-to-face conversations with everybody in the division. These conversations made me more comfortable honestly because I felt that I knew them; not that I knew them very well but I knew them.

Becky. In the beginning, I would probably spend more time on the phone with my lawyer and with my supervisor who is the vice president and I am saying,” I think I am going to do this what do you think?” And so there was more checking of my
decisions before I actually made them.

**Sheryl.** I think because I am new to the institution and I am logical and analytical decision maker, I was really wanting to gather facts and information and learning before going to a new direction. And I’ve trained to really value the contribution of the people who really came before me and when I looked back to ten years.

**Emergent Element 2.2.2—Making decisions based on thinking and logic.** All participating female SSAOs noted that when they made decisions they use critical thinking and logic in determining what is the best solution for a situation and reacted only to what is urgent.

**Paula.** One of the things that I would tell you is I feel like I'm somebody who's been blessed with a good sense of judgment. …So I am very grounded and I think that because I know myself and I am centered, so I am not someone who makes decisions based on wanting people to like me. I make decisions based on what's best for the individual or for the organization.

**Rose.** It is usually the most urgent things and the things that most aligned with the divisional goals and that will most likely help students and ultimately advance students’ learning and enhance students’ experience. The way I make decisions I want to know what are the most important things that need to happen. Uhm.. and the things that are going to help the most amount of people. I am very logical in all of my decision-making, I use reason and logic primarily first, and then I go with instinct.

**Taylor.** Sometimes I joke that I am a “firefighter” at work. I was saying like in the early days, it was just chaos. I was like,…these two staff members are fighting
and I have to go and take care of that, this student is very angry or the president wants this from me, and he wants it now. Those things they still happen everyday.

**Sub-theme 3: Making decisions now.** This sub-theme describes the experiences of female SSAOs in making decisions currently, which explains their personal growth and accumulated experiences in handling work tasks. Four elements emerged from their description of their current experiences of making decisions: 1) Becoming More Confident to Be in Charge of Making Decisions, 2) Participative Decision Making When Necessary, 3) Making Decisions Based on Facts and Logic, and 4) Building Trust and Gaining More Responsibilities.

**Emergent Element 2.3.1—Becoming more confident to be in charge of making decisions.** All the participating female SSAOs stated that they became highly confident to make decisions independently and quickly due to gaining experiences and learning how to handle work responsibilities.

**Linda.** Recently I had to work with a student who got caught vandalizing on campus, she did not respond to my outreach and she stopped attending classes. A couple of months later, her parents contacted me and were very angry at me and at my processes. Basically, I realized that they were sharing a side of the story from the student that was not exactly accurate. So I was able to bring the group together and work through all the details to eventually resolve the confusion. Back in the day when I was new and younger, I would have been a little intimidated by the angry parents and I would have been worrying about the crying students but now I am sort of stepping out of it. I make it a [safe environment] where everybody can talk honestly and we come to an accurate conclusion. It is far more effective.
*Elia.* What is different is my own thought processes and what I think about often just comes very naturally and very quickly. So the pieces that I outlined before in terms of doing research and getting people's thoughts and experiences about a certain topic and what's the cost going to be those kinds of things rather than “oh... my gosh... I got to figure these things out.” It is like Oh … yeah this part kind of goes into making this decision. I guess it is much more of a greater level of comfort in knowing I got this. I know how to do this and know how to do it quickly and thoroughly.

**Emergent Element 2.3.2—Participative decision making when necessary.** All participating female SSAOs noted that they include upper level administrators and deans and staff when they make decisions based on the necessity to include their input and based on the impact of the decision.

*Kay.* I tend to run things by the executive team. If I know it is going to cost a lot of money or I think if it might be an objection to it because I want to know that they are going to back me up. If it is going to cost a lot of money honestly it is way easier to get the executive team to say yes we have to do it no matter what than for me to say that. If the president said it then it is ok right?..more than me saying it. So I do use them for strategic decisions but not for every decision because honestly they expect me to make decisions. But I do run the big ones by them that I think they are going to have an impact, somebody might object to that decision is going to cost some money, the board of trustee might not like it. The board might say’ what the heck” I run those by them. So I run that by them and [Buy] their support. So if the president gets a phone call about it so he does not
get blindsided about it. So he knows about it and he approved it. So that’s kind of the strategy issue right..that you do not want the president to be surprised.

Anne Word. I tend to make decisions pretty collaboratively. [However], there are some decisions that have to be made that are just my decisions - so whether somebody can stay here or not from my staff is a decision I make that’s not a collaborative one. It's not legal for me to collaborate with anybody else on that. So typically almost every decision I make, I want to be as informed as I can be, so I seek a lot of input into it. And because other people are smarter than I am about things that I don't know about, so my job is really to look broadly and what helps me do that is hearing from people who are doing specific things within that broad view.

Emergent Element 2.3.3—Making decisions based on facts and logic. Nine of the participating female SSAOs noted that it is important to make decisions based on facts along with logic and utilizing multiple sources of data.

Anne Word. In fact we’ve always collected a lot of data, we’ve done lots of assessments. Well I’ll use assessments as an example. This year in our division we have focused all of our professional development as a division, on assessments. So its kind of building up a common shared base of knowledge that we all have about assessments and identifying in each area two or three things that we are assessing this year. So we get more practice assessing.

Ella. There are times that there are issues that come up that we may know a little bit about it but may not know a lot about. One piece I think about is with Title 9 and the new regulations that have been proposed by the Secretary of Education
Betsy DeVos and with those we've done research to understand what is the impact they might have on our students. What is the impact they might have on our current process that we have in place to deal with anything related to Title 9 and what are other institutions doing to address the same issues.

**Emergent Element 2.3.4—Building trust and gaining more responsibilities.**

Seven of the participating female SSAOs reported that they expressed their competence and developed trust with people in their institutions in particular upper level administrators, which allowed them to have the power of making significant decisions and receive more responsibilities.

**Kerry Persons.** And then across all folks that I have worked with-- whether they are in the division of student affairs or other colleagues in the cabinet-- I think trust has been built over time right. I’ve had some opportunity to prove myself in the role, and handle some difficult things in ways that I think it helped establish a trusting relationship.

**Paula.** I just signed off on [nearly $55 million] dollars for a new [building]. I put my name on a [nearly $55 million] dollar bill … that's a lot of money. The new [another building] is [nearly $75 million] dollars. So when I sign my name to that kind of expense I need to know what exactly I am doing but I actually partner very very closely with the Vice President for Business and Finance. She's excellent and she understands budget and finance better than anybody I know and she and I have become really good colleagues. She is very helpful to me.

**Research Question 3**

The research question that led to the emergence of the third theme, “The
Challenges in Decision Making” was, “How do they describe the challenges of decision making in the workplace?” The female SSAOs’ responses indicated several challenges that they faced while handling work responsibilities.

This theme is categorized into six sub-themes: 1) Difficulty Making Large Scale Decisions, 2) Challenge of Balancing Work and Family Life, 3) Workplace Political Challenges, 4) Facing Gender Discrimination Behaviors, and 5) Women Can Be the Cause of Their Challenges.

Sub-theme 3.1: Difficulty making large-scale decisions. Nine of the participating female SSAOs noted that they found that making decisions at the institutional level (such as financial decisions and hiring diverse employees) was a very difficult process.

Becky I think budget cuts are very very (raised her voice for emphasis) difficult decisions haha.. We are embarking upon a re-organization of yearly spending, like we are planning on doing a little bit of re-organization on the next month or two. Kerry Persons. [It is challenging] When I am making a decision on behalf of an institution that has almost 160 years of history and has a diverse set of alumni and trustees and students and faculty and staff. One of the most challenging things is weighing all of those voices, right, in any particular decision and while I am well aware that a decision that I make might not align with every person. I am trying to find the right balance on behalf of the college, honoring its history and values and the people that make up the institution.

Paula. But what happened is the people that were left in the pipeline were really strong and talented but a lot of them happened to be the white females, they were
promoted to the position. So we do not have enough diversity in our leadership in Student Affairs now. …… And I feel a bit defensive about that because I definitely have it. I mean I promoted people and I have people in all these key positions and the president kind of scooped all of them up and put them in another area and then the people that were right there that deserve the promotions were still there. So now I'm like we have got to figure out how we're going to diversify our staff. We cannot stay as we are. There's no one in any of those positions that I would fire they all are doing great work. But we don't have new dollars to create new positions. So we're trying to figure out how to deal with this lack of diversity in our leadership in Student Affairs.

**Sub-theme 3.2: The challenge of balancing work and family life.** Seven of the participating female SSAOs discussed how maintaining balance between personal and professional life was challenging due to the fact that this role is extremely demanding.

*Linda.* Another challenge, and I think it is a big one, that many women face anyways is work-life balance. I can stay here forever but it is important to remember at a certain point that your job ends and you need to pay attention to the other part of your life too. I do not do anything personally social, so generally, I have not done so many social things such as any of those evenings. And sometimes I gave up weekends too when something comes up. It is just the way I am and that’s what I do. And times present themselves, for example, the last couple of years I’ve lost people that were close to me and in those moments I realized when someone’s gone you cannot spend time with them anymore. You realized that you missed a lot of time with them.
**Rose.** [SSAO] is a 24/7 job so you are always on call, you are always available. Students never stop so work is 24/7 and it can be very demanding, I have two young children and a partner and they understand my work and are patient but it is not a balanced life by any means.

**Sub-theme 3.3: Workplace political challenge.** Nine of the participating female SSAOs reported facing employees who were not happy with some decisions or employees who were problematic could be difficult.

**Ella.** So it can be a challenge to want to make a decision and know who might be supportive of it, who might not be supportive of it. Is that [one vice president’s] decision to make? Is it [another vice president’s] decision to make? is it ours together to make? …. And sometimes when we are trying to make a decision, we need to partner with the other entities that may have similar issues or concerns that have been brought forward…..So we are trying to figure out some of those differences so those can be very very very challenging.

**Becky.** We are embarking upon a re organization of yearly spending, like we are planning on doing a little bit of re organization on the next month or two. And we have not done re organization at our institution and in their division for about 12 years. And as a part of this I am taking a department that has several different functional areas in it and we are splitting those up, and splitting up some of those functional areas into their own departments, which means someone has been working for a very very (raised her voice for emphasis) long time and who has had oversight of those multiple functions and will not have oversight of those functions anymore. And so these are hard conversations to have and there was a
lot of crying when I started having this conversation with the employee who was really upset, she felt like we were taking responsibilities away from her. Feeling that... she even said to me at one point “you are trying to get me to retire early” and it is just those kind of difficult personnel conversations that you have to have with staff.

Paula. So if you have an employee who is problematic in their work behavior, those are really challenging for me. …But you sometimes have people who are not open to feedback, who are not collaborative, who bully, who intimidate, who don't handle diversity issues well. You have people, people are people so you have people sometimes that need to be redirected or disciplined or fired if they don't get it. Those things are really difficult and so for me personnel challenges have always been the hardest thing for me to deal with.

Sub-theme 3.4: Facing gender discrimination behaviors. Seven of the participating female SSAOs discussed their perspectives or their experiences of not being taken seriously by male administrators due to facing discriminatory behaviors.

Paula. I can tell you, that was years ago, there was a male Vice President here who was totally disrespectful to me in a meeting. Absolutely, he had a bad temper and just raged at me in a meeting in front of a lot of other people. I do not know what the topic was, and I had been told he had that kind of temper. And he sometimes did that. He did it with me in that meeting. I did not say anything in that meeting because of my values.

Sheryl. Looking younger than you are when you are working with people who do not know that well yet…I think there is a bit of a gender bias that can be there
until you have been in command of that situation. And people do not know you and you are a woman there is maybe an initial second guessing like “what do you know and what set of knowledge and experience are you going to bring to bear the situation”.

Mary Lewis. When I go to my deans meetings, we have the [State] Community College Services Association, we have deans meetings and every college usually sends their deans somebody who handles anything under student affairs and that room is a majority female. And so in our field females are more represented than males in senior positions or even director positions and so I feel like women are making those gains, however, I can't help but think sometimes haha.. They are not making the decisions. They're getting the positions that maybe don't always have the authority in those positions. You know, I feel like if you looked around our institution most of my directors in my departments are females as well as the deans.

Ella. I would say [men] have advantages in pay, in the amount that they are paid. Sometimes in the opportunities that they're given, whether it's a job, an opportunity for professional development to attend a conference, or to represent the University in some way. Also, their opinion is often highly valued and thought of as it is, which haha.., in my mind, their perception is in their experience of how something [occurred] but I don't necessarily want them to speak for me. And so I would say especially when we're talking about issues that might be related to the University as a whole and how we see the university. And there may be one perspective that a person has, that a man has, and sometimes that’s heard as what
it truly is. And if I have a different perspective, certainly I am going to say it and share it. But what I have seen is that often the man’s opinion is what is accepted.

Four of the participating also female SSAOs stated that the “Good Old Boys Club” still existed in the workplace among upper level administrators in which female employees were not included in making important decisions.

Kay. It tends to be “wink wink” between men and all of a sudden something is happening, and you are like “we did not even discuss that, how did that even get done.” And they say” oh we had a conversation at the hockey game” you know that type of thing; it does not happen so much with men and women. It is just that network that it is hard to beat and you cannot break into it usually. Because I am not going to hang out at the hockey game with them, you know what I mean. There are certain things that I do not want to do? I am not going to smoke cigars with them, because that is not for me. So do things get done without my involvement? The answer is yes. Do I agree with the decision? The answer is no.

Mary Lewis. There was one day that I sat in on the leadership meeting and it was very clear that a decision was made regarding something that we were going to do with housing, and it was very clear that a decision was made through a conversation of the president to other male members on the leadership team. Housing reports to me and I had not been included in any of those conversations. And some of it was also that they're all down there next to each other [at the table in the meeting], I'm down here, and so I'm the only leadership team member or as far as the deans go I am the only dean that is down here over with this department with my people. Everyone else—the Dean of Academic is down, there and the
Assistant Dean of Academic and the Dean of Finance is down there—so I'm separated physically so I do not know if they were talking down there. So I thought that I am not part of it, and I am like “hang on a minute, why is this the first time that I am brought into this conversation? because it seems very apparent that you three have had this conversation and I have no idea what you're talking about, and housing falls under me”.

**Sub-theme 3.5: Women can be the cause of their challenges.** This final theme reflects how women can present challenges to themselves or against each other. Five of the participating female SSAOs stated that women sometimes can compete against each other or be consumed with fear of taking charge of making decisions.

*Becky.* But to me, I think we hold back, women we hold ourselves back sometimes by being unsure by not being confident. So me being more confident in, especially in making quick decisions in a crisis moment. Six years ago when right at the very beginning like I am better at that now. I wish I would have had that confidence at the very very beginning that I do now. So I guess my ultimate advice is to have confidence in yourself, there is a reason you are selected to be the dean. And you can do it.

*Linda.* Here at work, I do not get that from the men. I feel that all the gentlemen who work here are easygoing and do not treat women differently in a stereotypical fashion. In terms of females, sometimes there is bitchiness I guess and I would say competitiveness that is not necessarily across the board but a couple of people. Mostly we have a nice flow here. Recently I had a couple of retirements, and they are both females and they have been here for a very very
long time and they are very territorial. And so if something that I was doing as a part of my job, crossed over into an area that they thought was theirs they would/could stop it, talk to their supervisors, and raise a red flag instead of just working collaboratively.

_Tylor._ I think as women, at least American women, we sometimes are so competitive with each other, and then, we just are not nice to each other. And sometimes we are just flat out mean, uhm because it is so hard to get to the top. It is so hard to be seen and to be invited behind closed doors professionally. That I think inherently has created a women culture of competition. That I should not support you and see you as a part of my support network, I should see you as competition. And so I am going try to beat you…. to the finish line. And I see that, I mean all over this place. As women we just do not support each other enough and that’s troubling to me, because we all are fighting for the same position. Theoretically we all are fighting for equality, but the challenge is that we rather than supporting each other sometimes, we beat each other against one another. I think that’s troubling.

**Research Question 4**

The research question that concentrated on the theme of “The Strategies for Decision Making” was, “How do they describe different strategies of decision making in the workplace?” When asked about the strategies that were used while making decisions, the participating female SSAOs discussed a wide range of practices that are utilized in making decisions and shared some perspectives.

This theme is comprised of five subthemes: 1) Learning the Importance of

**Sub-theme 4.1: Learning the importance of supporting decisions with evidence.** All of the participating female SSAOs reported that they took making informed decisions seriously by using several resources and techniques to collect data, which allowed them to be valued as an SSAO.

*Kay.* I think that you have to have evidence, in order for people to take you seriously. Because what happens is if you go and say, “I think or this is what students would like or this might work” you have to go in with data you have to go in to with best practices. You cannot just go with your gut, it is just a phrase that I use” you have to go like a grown up” I can go toe to toe with the president if I have the data if I have the facts.

*Mary Lewis.* So was just doing a lot of research and there were not a lot of institutions in this state at the time that had housing. uhmm.. I think we were number 8 in this state, so I was having to extend my reach to out-of-state institutions our size which … you don't see many institutions our size that have housing either. … So it is gathering that much information from other institutions to see how they handle it, because you don't know when you've never done it, and it was new for all of us even I don't think even our president had housing under him before. So it is just networking and contacting people, gathering information
from websites, from people themselves, going on visits so we took 4 tours of housing buildings and spoke with their housing staff to get information on how they handle certain situations for facilities for conduct for whatever the case may be. So it is just not being afraid of there is something you do not know, to get out there and make connections with people do the research and then formulate your own processes that fit your campus.

*Ella.* What I have found that has been the most helpful to me is to find people who are similar to my situation. Umm ..so to be able to network with other professionals who are in a similar position and that might be at the university or it might be at other institutions across the country.

**Sub-theme 4.2: Being unafraid to take ownership for making decisions and taking risks.** Eight of the participating female SSAOs stated that it is important for women to be courageous and to make decisions independently and take ownership of their actions.

*Kerry Persons.* Do not be afraid to consult with folks who work with you and figure who you can trust and strategically use those voices. But also do not abdicate your responsibility to make a decision when the decision should be yours.

*Linda.* Additionally, do not let your fear keep you from doing the things you know are right. Sure it is only related to being female but sometimes when you are in a difficult situation all these fears come up. For example, I am wondering am I going to get fired for speaking my mind, am I going to get yelled at, and am I going to get people mad. Those are the emotional pieces and if you can push
those aside or work through those and focus on the real reason for whatever you are doing then you are going to make better decisions. Fear is a real hindrance, and it can really sort of hinder the logical approach to decision making.

*Mary Lewis.* I think we as [women] often feel that in leadership positions you have to come across as being cutthroat strong. You know and you do to a point. But I think it's that not being afraid to stand up, exhibit your knowledge, show what you’re worth is because I think sometimes people, and again this is just a total generalization, but I think women either sit back and don't say as much because they are females or they cross the line into that point where you don't want to be around them because (slight pause) the only term that I can think of right now is one that is not appropriate hahaha... When you reach that point where they feel that they have to prove something, they have to prove themselves, and so they just so (pause). I was going to say “bitch” hahaha...that’s almost too much aggressive.. to much of a pit bull approach, that then they rub people the wrong way. That they then hurt relationships because they're so aggressive. So I think females have to find that balance between showing your worth, but not coming across as being too aggressive like you're trying too hard to prove your worth.

**Sub-theme 4.3: Receiving personal support by creating work-life balance.** Six of the female SSAOs who participated discussed “work/life integration” as one of the strategies for handling work responsibilities.

*Flint.* I think one of the maybe sort of the unique things about my situation is that professionally I have not moved around. A lot of people in higher ed move around a lot. I’ve been here in this work since 1989 at the same institution, and so I knew
that I never had any intention of leaving. And so one of the things that I can say
about my boss, he has kids considerably younger than mine and I could say I am
doing this now. You will be able to do it later and I can cover for you while you
are doing it because mine will be gone. I do not have to continue to take this time
off once they are in college. It just sort of changes and so I knew I was not going
anywhere, uhm..that was just something we knew. I do not have those
responsibilities and so now I can give back maybe [by] doing things for my boss..
his kids now almost in college.

Becky. The other thing that I think is helpful to me in moving up the ladder is that
I would call it more “work integration” than work life balance. I am not one of
those people who leaves at 5 o'clock and does not work. so I work all the time I
am the [SSAO] like I have evening commitments and I have weekend
commitments. And how I have been able to do that, and make it real for me is my
family becomes a part of that. When I have a big fancy gala that I am attending I
buy a ticket for my spouse, and John (I changed the partner name) comes with me
to the big fancy gala and my kids always come to MLK celebration…. So we buy
student tickets to all sporting events, luckily my husband loves sports. Sometimes
I am going to football games and basketball games because I kind of need to be
present as an [SSAO]. But he loves it, haha..(She is excited) so to me we are
having a family time at a university event. And that’s how I was able to, I think,
tackle this kind of student affairs job the way I have. One I have 100% support
from my husband and my children. But two, I actually have a really fluid
boundary about my work life and family life. And to me that works. For other
people it might not work. For me it worked perfectly.

**Sub-theme 4.4: Learning to overcome gender discrimination while handling work responsibilities.** Six of the participating female SSAOs discussed their experiences or perspectives of overcoming discriminatory gender behaviors while making decisions or within the general workplace by describing several strategies.

One participating female SSAO commented on being transparent in her work allowed her to gain respects and trust from male employees.

*Kay.* They [the men she supervises] got used to me when they knew that I was not going to play games and there is no drama in me. I am a straight shooter and I think once they figured that out they knew what difference that I make. I did not pull any cards and I think once they figured out all of that I was fine.

Another participating female SSAO noted that women need to present themselves as tough leaders in the workplace through standing for their rights.

*Mary Lewis.* [In the meeting] I'm separated physically so I do not know if they were talking down there. So I thought that I am not part of it, but I actually in that meeting just kind of exploded and said, “why are you even asking for my input now it seems that the men on this committee have made the decision and so are you asking for my opinion or has the decision already been made because if the decision has already been made I am not going to waste my breath”. And then that led to a future conversation with the president where I just told him. I went to him; he did not call me or anything like that. I went to him and said, “I need you to explain this, if I am over housing and you are having conversations with other people and with the one person --the finance person-- is involved, I said “you're
having conversations that you should be coming to me first and we make the
decision or the recommendation and then see what others feel”. uhmm.. He did
agree with me on that, and I voiced my opinion to him.

One participating female SSAO reported that she felt empowered to handle work
responsibilities due to having female supervisor.

*Ella.* I think in terms of decision-making because I've had a great fortune of
having a [supervisor/boss] who is female, she has her voice is heard, and her
voice is very much respected at the university. I then have had the opportunity to
not only to work with her but know that the work that I do will also be
represented by her at the bigger level. And so that has been very very positive.

**Sub-theme 4.5: Learning how to deal with workplace politics including**

**problematic employees.** Four of the participating female SSAOs described how they
deal with unhappy employees through transparency and open communication.

*Rose.* The way that I do that I am open, honest, and transparent with her. If there
are issues that arise I bring them up directly with her and try to work things
through dialogue and conversation and to get on the other side and turn that page
so we can keep moving toward our goals. It has not been easy but I do use
confrontation but not aggressive confrontation, uhmm.. I use professional
dialogue to move through it and get beyond it.

Another participating female SSAO stated that understanding the political
landscape on campus is important.

*Paula.* We got together informally once a month and we talked about the
university and the things going on, and the things we were concerned about, and
we would share information so it was a way of me getting a much better picture of the political landscape and understanding the university from a variety of vantage points that helped me know how to move from a strategic perspective and it helped me know where the land mines were to avoid or where the problematic personnel were, where people who would be really supportive of helping me accomplish what I am trying to accomplish might be. So it was a way of developing a cadre of political allies. But it was informal it was just a group that we kind of found each other and then we recognize how helpful our conversations were with each other and so we started doing it on a regular basis. That was a strategy early on that I used. That I think really helped through, but that group fell off none of them are still here and they are gone. But I think because of that network I've developed other networks and I developed an understanding of how important it is to have allies across the university and so when I have new people come into student affairs I train them to do the same thing so then you have a stronger network across the university because if people in your organization are doing the same thing the networking and the connections are much stronger so that to me was a critical piece and so that helped in decision-making because I had broader context and understanding yeah yeah I think that was actually very huge I used to do a workshop on navigating the political landscape and part of what is in that workshop is (A)- knowing who your allies are, (B) choosing your battles.

Research Question 5

The research question that led to the emergence of the, “Handling Crises on
Campus” theme was, “If they believe they have handled a crisis, how do they describe their decision making process while handling a crisis on campus?” When asked to describe the experiences of handling a crisis, the participating female SSAOs talked about either their perspectives or experiences of decision making during an extreme situation on campus. This included discussions of the challenges that they faced as well as the strategies that they used.

This theme is categorized into four sub-themes: 1) Crises on Campus, 2) Making Decisions During Crises, 3) Challenges Faced During Crises, and 4) Strategies for Handling Crises on Campus.

**Sub-theme 5.1: Crises on campus.** This sub-theme describes the perspectives of or the experiences of the participating female SSAOs when it comes to crises on campus. All participants involved with crises on campus either discussed a crisis that occurred at their institution or described their perspectives of what can be considered a crisis. This sub-theme is categorized into four emergent elements: 1) Student Death on/off Campus, 2) An Incident Resulting in Severe Damage to Facilities, and 3) Active Shooting on Campus.

**Emergent Element 5.1.1—Student death on/off campus.** All of the participating female SSAOs discussed their experiences or perspectives when considering student death by suicide as a crisis on campus.

*Anne Word.* I will use a student's death because that’s just very hard. So we had a student who died of a suicide. He was a senior who was six weeks away from graduating with his degree. He lived off campus and his death surprised everyone. No one knew he had a history of depression, nobody knew he was in a bad way.
And I was out of [state for an accreditation visit] when he died. The student died, I had to get back from there to here as quickly as I could because I am the one who manages those things. So it was very very difficult because he was well known, we are a small campus and everybody knew this kid, really nice kid.

Becky. So we are a pretty large institution and so every year we have 4 or 5 student deaths. We are going to have a student fire. Every week or two I feel that a student loses their parents to death or grandparents. Smaller campuses, smaller institutions they can go a couple of years and not have a student death.

Kay. We had a student drown on campus several years ago and that became a crisis because he was a member of an NCAA team so we had all that. We had all the students upset, it was a huge campus crisis because of the incident that had happened. The way that I handled that was I basically I took that student’s side of it. But in any student’s death I deal with the parents, I do not necessarily deal with the hospital or the police but I am the end point person for the parents.

Emergent Element 5.1.2—An incident resulting in severe damage to facilities.

Seven of the participating female SSAOs noted that a major crisis could occur by having incident that causes severe damage to campus infrastructure and disrupts daily operations such as fire.

Becky. Oh my gosh we have so many crises on campus all the time haha. I will give you one that I felt that helped my confidence. When I was probably two years in we had a huge off campus fire. It affected 3 or 4 structures in our (name) areas, it permanently displaced 20 students and those 20 students lost everything. But it also temporarily displaced another 20 students. Those students we needed
to help for a couple of days so they were able to go back and save their belongings. There were 20 of our students who had lost everything. We have had house fires before that affected 3 or 4 students but we had never had something that affects so many folks.

*Paula.* I'll give you some examples…. you think about a riot on campus that involve students, you think about failure of pipes so you have to vacate a building…, but we haven't had that thankfully.

*Kerry Persons.* So I guess a crisis is anything that has the potential to interfere with the regular operation of an institution. We live close to a train station-- so a crisis might be if a chemical fell off a train that would affect our ability to continue to run campus and our classes as planned.

*Emergent Element 5.1.3—Active shooting on campus.* Six of the participating female SSAOs noted that having an active shooter on campus could be considered a major crisis at their institution.

*Sheryl.* Active shooters on campus, is a wide level of crisis or emergency. A terrorist activity at an event, a situation at a football game where a group of people gets out of control, for whatever the reason such as drugs or alcohol is related or people become worried about some terrorist activity.

*Tylor.* It was a Saturday, fortunately, it was not a traditional school day, which made it easier, haha.. it really was, all of the people involved were not affiliated with the institution, they got into an argument off campus, got into their vehicles and began a chase…like vehicle chase, and during that chase one of the vehicles shot at another vehicle, and incapacitated the driver. And the driver slid off into
our parking lot on campus and they all got out of the vehicle and continued to shoot each other. So it occurred on our campus, but none of them were students, and it was not directly affiliated to the institution. But it still occurred on our campus, and it did scare our students and staff. It is frightening to think about what is happening right out here in the parking lot. And you have to come to class on Monday.

**Sub-theme 5.2: Making decisions during crises.** This sub-theme describes the ways participating female SSAOs make decisions while handling a crisis situation on their campus. This sub-theme’s focus resulted in the emergence of three elements: 1) Forming Decisions Independently, and 2) Delegating Responsibilities to the Appropriate Individuals, and 3) Making Decisions Collaboratively.

**Emergent Element 5.2.1—Forming decisions independently.** Eleven of the participating female SSAOs noted that they make all the necessary decisions to handle a crisis situation and then inform the employees who are involved in handling that situation.

*Rose.* That’s never easy, responding to that. The dean of students is the go to person. So as soon as I get the information I start to make decisions immediately, you try to figure out who needs to know what, when, and you start to organize people around you and make a plan. You always work with the family first, you differ you decision making in many ways uhm.. about how to retain/contain information and what information to release. You always make a statement to the community, offer constant support, you do everything you can to support the community along with tending to the family. And managing information sharing
and often times you partner with the police. Your partners are your communication team. There are many moving parts. you have to able to work through it fully and unemotionally.

**Becky.** So I got a call about 4 o'clock in the morning to open the student center as a warming shelter because it was in the middle of winter and it was snowing. Because I was on crisis duty, I was the first responder to get to the building to allow these students who had been woken up in the fire alarm into our students union for seeking shelter. And that was my first major crisis. And we during that day, there was a lot of people who came, the whole community came out and we had to organize a food and a clothing and a supply drive, and there are students who need eye glasses we contacted eye doctors, we had people who were diabetic and needed connection with medical doctors in order to get insulin.

**Emergent Element 5.2.2—Delegating responsibilities to the appropriate individuals.** Eleven of the participating female SSAOs reflected on directing the employees to do the necessary tasks to handle the crisis situation effectively.

**Becky.** I headed our crisis response team for the entire institution and we all came together, and in that moment, --when I was talking about being a dean and, knowing what you should do and knowing who you are and just doing it-- in that moment and I was very directive and felt bad about it later actually it was funny because I am not usually a very directive decision maker. And when I got the whole group together I was like, “we’ve got this many students this is what I need none of them have ID and I need to replace their IDs. I need OIT can you replace their IDs”. I just looked at our guy and said” we are not going to charge them of
course we are going to give them free IDs.” Because of course at every institution, you lose your ID you get charged for a new one.

**Emergent Element 5.2.3—Making decisions collaboratively.** One of the participating female SSAOs reported that she handled a crisis on their campus in a collaborative manner by involving the appropriate people while making decisions.

Paula. Well first of all I don't manage them by myself because we have these teams we have all these different teams that do different pieces of it. so I think the first thing is you don't manage a crisis by yourself and to be better prepared you are practicing and thinking through what you might need given any particular crisis. That is very helpful……… But there are a lot of things so I am very involved and engaged in crisis. We have a whole crisis management plan at the university. So I'm a part of the emergency operation. The president's cabinet are the ones that when there's a crisis we get together to talk about policy so I'm trying to think about the last time we were convened oh umm.. There was a fire on campus, there was a fire in a residence hall so we are involved in a lot of ways because if there is a fire in a residence hall that is in my portfolio. So first of all your first priority is safety and getting everybody out.

**Sub-theme 5.3: Challenges of handling crisis on campus.** This sub-theme describes the experiences and perspectives of the participating female SSAOs about the challenges faced when they make decisions to handle crises on their campus. This sub-theme identifies three challenges that are presented in these emergent elements: 1) Facing Barriers to Effective Communication, 2) Uncertainty While Making Decisions, and 3) The Challenge of Insufficient Preparation.
**Emergent Element 5.3.1—Facing barriers to effective communication.** Eight of the participating female SSAOs described dealing with upset and panicked people on or off campus and minimizing the spread of rumors to the public as a challenge.

**Paula.** In this day and age students are busy texting their parents “there's a fire in my building I am standing in my pajamas” and whatever you know. And then so the parents are panicked the parents are calling the President’s Office, the president is calling the university relations and at that point the systems crash and you can't communicate with anybody.

**Kay.** Privacy was a challenge but also dealing with very upset students, and very upset parents. Having to explain to the board of trustees what happened so all the challenges revolved a lot around information. And we had to decide how much [information] to give and how much to withhold so I think that’s a real challenge.

**Emergent Element 5.3.2—Uncertainty while making decisions.** Seven of the participating female SSAOs noted that being completely in charge of handling a crisis situation can be very challenging due to intense emotions and the inability to immediately access to information.

**Rose.** I think the biggest challenge is not to get lost in the emotion of it. The fear, the sadness, the panic, the anger, and often times it is just so many emotions wrapped up in losing somebody…. But yeah you do and you are right in the center of it and so for me that’s a challenge.

**Kay.** That was very difficult because while I am talking to [the deceased student’s] parents I do not know if the university did something wrong or not. So it was walking a fine line that early on like first day and second day, first week
and second week.

**Emergent Element 5.3.3—The challenge of insufficient preparation.** Three of the participating female SSAOs reported that not enough physical preparation on campuses could present a challenge during crises.

*Linda.* We have 4 buildings that are close but separated. And we have another that is a little bit of a hike. We do not have an announcement system that works very effectively. So in terms of logistic needs in which letting people know that there is an issue, if an issue arises how are we getting the message to all buildings and letting them know what they need to know, when I am talking about navigating that’s what I mean. So for example, if there is an active shooter in one of our buildings how would anyone else in the other buildings know that there is an active shooter located in that building, and they need either to lock down or get off campus.

*Paula.* Immediately thereafter is communication because in this day and age of students are busy texting their parents there's a fire in my building I am standing in my pajama and whatever you know. And then so the parents are panicked the parents are calling the President’s Office, the presidents are calling the universal relations and to the point where systems crash and can't communicate with anybody.

**Sub-theme 5.4: Strategies for handling crisis on campus.** This sub-theme describes the ways and perspectives of the participating female SSAOs in making decisions while handling crises on their campus. This sub-theme identifies four strategies that are presented in these emergent elements: 1) Being Emotionally Stable in Order to
Handle the Situation, 3) Effective Communication with Individuals, and 4) Effective Preparation for Handling a Crisis.

**Emergent Element 5.4.1—Being emotionally stable in order to handle the situation.** Eleven of the participating female SSAOs noted that it is important to be in charge of making decisions by reporting several strategies that enabled them to handle crisis on campus.

*Becky.* I think in the [SSAO] role because we are responding to crises a lot, haha.. Sometimes in the crisis moment if there is literally a fire going on right now or you just have a student who has died by a suicide. And you have to be the one who makes the phone calls to try to figure out if the parents are aware or not. Those are not the times for you to call other people and ask hey you do you think I should do this..haha.. There is a reason that you become an [SSAO], like you are good at what you do. And you have been given that authority and responsibility. So there are those moments in crises in that decision-making where you have to believe in yourself. And you got to have that confidence to just make that decision.

*Sheryl.* First and foremost the skill that you use is really to remain calm. And in many of these situations especially when you are in something happening in the moment…I was working during an […] earthquake. If something like that happened, your training kicks in, your experience is there, the prior planning, and the protocol is there .all these aspects are important foundations but how you are in those moments is [what matters].

**Emergent Element 5.4.2—Effective communication with individuals.** Seven of
the participating female SSAOs noted that it is important to effectively contact the appropriate employees to handle a crisis situation as well as carefully share crisis information with the public.

*Tylor.* I got immediately in touch with our PR person our chief of communications, he does all our institution press releases, and I got in touch with him. And we were sort of crafting messages right away to keep employees and students informed so they did not fill in the gaps. So sometimes with humans, I think we all do this,, when we don't know everything, we start to fill in spaces with information, the what ifs, the maybes, which are generally not true. So the PR person and I try to craft messages that we are trying to minimize empty places. So we gave people information, so they are less likely to fill in gaps with poor information. And so we try to keep people informed every step of the way and we did that through a variety of all modality. So we sent emails to the institution community, we sent press releases to the local media. The information was there and we put information on the website.

**Emergent Element 5.4.3—Effective preparation of handling crises.** Six of the participating female SSAOs discussed their experiences of early preparation and following protocols, which ease the process of making decisions.

*Mary Lewis.* Things here I think work a little bit differently because we are so small, but if it is a situation where we have an active shooter on campus. We have a protocol that something goes over the system, we've got to wear locks out front, everybody gets to the main door in here, or locks their doors and get under their desks. So we have all of those processes laying down, but then if it's something in
housing we've got a protocol that if you know something like a suicide, obviously 911 is called immediately, I am called I come to campus and our PR person comes to campus. We get resources for students so we kind of have protocols in place.

_Ella_. So there's a large group at the University that are representatives from all the different areas of campus umm they come together if something like [a crisis occurs]. And we do this ongoing training, these tabletop exercises. So that we know how to communicate with each other we know what to think of, at that point in time if we're dealing with something like that we have emergency action guidelines or AAGs they are called for our different areas to determine what are the questions we should ask, what are the next steps we should take, what should we be thinking about. There's a group that works with the immediate pieces that are coming in, immediate pieces of information, deciding what should happen next. And there is another group that is looking at the policy’s pieces of that. The policies are, for instance, if classes need to be postponed, for how long and who is going make that decision. If there are people who have been injured what is the policy of the university in terms of what liability do we have in terms of their health and safety. And are there pieces that will pay for in terms of their medical.. Bills or is that responsibility theirs.. Or is there something in the middle that we might do.

_Anne Word_. And then another part of it is to really learn from it. What we learned from this last power outage, we are going to apply to the next power outage. Or with this last student death, what we are going to apply to the next student death so that we are better at responding. So I think that this last piece of learning is going
forward and kind of recovering from the crisis. This is really important.

**Chapter IV Summary**

This chapter reported the findings of this study. These findings emerged from the analysis of 12 interview transcripts. Findings were presented in five themes that correspond with the research questions in this study. The first theme focused on female SSAOs’ experiences. This first theme is discussed in two subthemes as: 1) Female SSAOs in the Workplace, and 2) Female SSAOs’ Decision Making Skills.

Data in the second theme focused on the changes in decision-making across female SSAOs’ Careers. This theme is discussed in three sub-themes: 1) Making Decisions in the Beginning of Being an SSAO, 2) Making Decisions During Early Years, and 3) Making Decisions Now.

The third theme concentrated on the challenges that female SSAOs faced in the process of decision-making. The participating female SSAOs described several challenges, which are discussed in six subthemes: 1) Difficulty Making Large Scale Decisions, 2) The Challenge of Balancing Work and Family Life, 3) Workplace Political Challenges, 4) Facing Gender Discrimination Behaviors, and 5) Women Can Be the Cause of Their Challenges.

The fourth theme focused on the strategies that female SSAOs used in the process of making decisions. Their responses for this theme are categorized into five sub-themes: 1) Learning the Importance of Supporting Decisions with Evidence, 2) Being Unafraid to Take Ownership for Making Decisions and Taking Risks, 3) Receiving Personal Support by Creating Work-Life Balance, 4) Learning to Overcome Gender Discrimination While Handling Work Responsibilities, and 5) Learning How to Deal with Workplace Politics.
Including Problematic Employees.

The fifth theme focused on how female SSAOs handle crises on campus and make decisions during these crises. This theme is categorized into four sub-themes: 1) Crises on Campus, 2) Making Decisions During Crises, 3) Challenges Faced During Crises, and 4) Strategies for Handling Crises on Campus.

Chapter V includes an in depth discussion of the purpose of this study, as well as the implications of the results as they aligned with the conceptual framework. This following chapter also presents the implications of this study and the recommendations for future research as they are aligned with existing literature.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of 12 female SSAOs who work at higher education institutions in the Midwest in making decisions across their careers and during times of crisis in order to understand what challenges they face and the strategies that they use to meet those challenges. It is essential that adequate knowledge regarding how female SSAOs make effective decisions and performances across their careers can be implemented to support other female SSAOs and women who seek this position. The data on the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers was collected through direct semi-structured interviews. The results of this study concerning female SSAOs’ experiences can be essential for other female SSAOs to be successful within their work environment while handling the responsibilities of this position. These female SSAOs’ experiences in decision making can be important for women who seek this position in order to better prepare themselves and to make informed decisions. Moreover, it is concluded that the results have been found to be in alignment with the conceptual framework of this study. Through data analysis, the data generated five themes, 20 subthemes, and 26 emergent elements. This chapter includes a discussion of this study’s findings based on the relevant literature. This chapter also highlights the implications of the results for this study as well as includes recommendations for future research.

Relationship of Results to Existing Studies

Five important research questions concentrated the research findings. The overarching question for this study was: what are the experiences of female SSAOs who
work in higher education institutions in the Midwest in regards to making decisions across their careers? The sub questions are:

1. How do female SSAOs describe the changes in decision-making experiences across their careers?
2. How do they describe the challenges of decision making in the workplace?
3. How do they describe different strategies of decision making in the workplace?
4. If they believe they have handled a crisis, how do they describe their decision making process while handling a crisis on campus?

Twelve participating female SSAOs responded to these five questions. Their responses were comprised of five themes that emerged from semi-structured interviews and were presented in Chapter 4. This study explored the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers in Midwestern higher education institutions. This study also examined the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making during normal days and times of crisis in order to understand the challenges that they face and the strategies that they use to handle those challenges.

**Discussion of Theme 1: Female SSAOs’ Experiences**

Theme 1 responded to the research question, “What are the experiences of female SSAOs who work in higher education institutions in the Midwest regarding making decisions across their careers?” these responses are organized into two sub-themes: 1) Female SSAOs in the Workplace, and 2) Female SSAOs’ Decision Making Skills.

The experiences of decision-making were initially discussed in this first subtheme that emerged from female SSAOs’ experiences theme. Female SSAOs’ description of their experiences in decision making was organized in two emergent elements: 1) Role
Description, and 2) SSAOs’ Responsibilities.

**Large SSAO Role and Wide Range of Responsibilities Within This Role.** All 12 participating female SSAOs noted that they oversee several different functional areas within Student Affairs or in their institution as well as managing a large number of people. There are some studies that support this finding. For example, Moneta (2017) recommended SSAOs to have effective management with stakeholders and constituents in their institutions. SSAOs should work and interact with upper level administrators, faculty members, staff, students, and peer administrators. In addition, Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) in their study of investigating the current states of Chief Student Affairs of Officers (CSAOs) in higher education found that CSAOs have several responsibilities in terms of managing employees, students, and institutional matters. These CSAOs handle financial responsibilities, manage crises on campus, deal with demographics shift and graduation rates, develop strategic planning, and deal with external communities. Thus, it is evident that my results are in alignment with other studies’ results in which female SSAOs oversee multiple functional unites and supervise a large number of individuals.

Based on their perspectives and experiences, the skills used by female SSAOs in decision-making were: 1) Skills in Interpersonal Communication, 2) The Ability to Prioritize, 3) Adherence with State and Federal Law, and 4) Being Flexible.

**Skills in interpersonal communication.** Having interpersonal skills while handling work responsibilities is mandatory for workflow and making effective decisions. Seven of the participating female SSAOs noted that effective interaction with individuals is an important skillset that enabled them to be transparent and handle...
conflict. This finding aligns with the literature. Based on some studies that investigated the situation of women leaders who aimed to acquire top leadership and persevere to handle work tasks, the researchers found that these women leaders in higher educational institutions developed communication and interpersonal skills as well as nurtured relationships with their employees to facilitate the interaction and resolve conflict among them (Cejda, 2008; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Nakitende, 2012; Kleihauer, Stephens, Hart, & Stripling, 2013). Thus, effective interpersonal communication is important for female SSAOs in order to have a good workflow.

**The ability to prioritize.** Eleven of the participating female SSAOs noted that when handling a situation prioritizing actions is an essential skill that involves the ability to make effective decisions about what is important to focus on and knowing what's not as important. This finding supports Montague’s (2011) findings in his study on female SSAOs’ leadership style within their work environment. He found that when female SSAOs handle a situation they focus on doing what is important/urgent, taking moderate risk, and being responsible for their decisions. He also found that these women perceive prioritizing actions and making high quality decisions as a significant matter for female SSAOs’ success in this role. Therefore, the ability to prioritize is a mandatory skillset that enable female SSAOs to handle work responsibilities affectively.

**Adherence with state and federal law.** Making decisions by ensuring compliance with federal, state, and local or institutional laws and regulations is an important skillset. Seven of the participating female SSAOs noted that understanding and applying a wide range of federal laws is a mandatory skillset for work progress and preventing legal issues for their institutions. Roper and Whitt (2016) in their study of SSAOs’ leadership
experiences, obstacles, and opportunities in this leadership position provided a support for these seven female SSAOs’ perspectives about the important skillset for making effective decisions. According to Roper and Whitt (2016), some external entities govern higher education institutions and SSAOs should follow their laws. For example, SSAOs need to apply state and federal laws and regulations when they create new policies or establish practices. Thus, it is important for female SSAOS to comply with the law to protect their institutions’ reputation and continue to function.

**Being flexible.** Flexibility in the workplace is an important skillset that female SSAOs recommend in order to make effective decisions. Ten of the participating female SSAOs noted that it is extremely important for women to be flexible in handling their responsibilities. This flexibility is important due to the fact that these women face constant changes in this role. Flexibility can be achieved by understanding the different nature of every situation and maintaining reliability, while adjusting their style of decision making to handle these situations. This result paralleled with some studies’ findings. For instance, Christman and McClellan (2008) examined the leadership style and decision making experiences of female administrators who lead educational leadership programs. They concluded that women are resilient when they lead these programs and their resiliency can change based on the situation. These female administrators express feminine traits such as nurturing relationships and developing employees, but also demonstrate masculine traits such as perseverance and fear of failing. In addition, according to Roper and Whitt (2016), SSAOs strive to perform well in their work environment and meet the necessary needs for their students. Due to the fact that many students nowadays have a fragile nature and deal with constant stress, SSAOs work
to provide inclusive leadership styles that can be adjusted according to individuals’ need or situation requirements. Therefore, flexibility is an important skillset that assists female SSAOs to be effective in making decisions.

**Discussion of Theme 2: The Changes in Decision-Making Across Careers**

Theme 2 responded to the research question, “How do female SSAOs describe the changes in decision-making experiences across their careers?” These responses are organized into three sub-themes: 1) Making Decisions in the Beginning of Being an SSAO, 2) Making Decisions During Early Years, and 3) Making Decisions Now.

Making decisions in the beginning of being an SSAO was described as, according to the female SSAOs’ perspectives and beliefs: 1) Feeling Alone, and 2) Feeling Supported.

**Feeling alone.** Eight of the participating female SSAOs when they first came to the position described their decision making process as feeling isolated in handling problems and nervous about not knowing what to do. This finding was not identified or previously supported in the literature. It is surprising that female SSAO may feel isolated or intimidated due to being in a new position. The transition to senior leadership positions can be difficult for female SSAOs regardless of good preparation through having the right experiences and credentials. Therefore, the beginning of this position can be difficult for most female SSAOs.

**Feeling supported.** Six of the participating female SSAOs found that developing relationships with individuals on campus and gaining administrative experiences was an effective approach. It enabled these women to get the support of employees within the workplace to make important decisions and for their appointment to an SSAO position.
These women interacted and nurtured effective relationships with everyone on campus such as students, staff, their colleagues, deans, and upper level administrators. This finding was not identified or previously supported in the literature. It is not surprising that female SSAOs who develop effective relationships with employees once they acquired this position receive support of the employees. In addition, female SSAOs who were internally appointed to this position receive support of the employees due to developing relationships in advance. Therefore, female SSAOs who had already developed relationships tend to feel supported and excited in the beginning of their position.

**Sub-theme 2.2: Making Decisions During Early Years.** This sub-theme includes each participant’s description of making decisions as well as interacting with the employees. This interaction occurred by handling work tasks, focusing on building relationships, and relying heavily on logical thinking. A couple of emergent elements described how female SSAOs experienced decision-making: 1) Being in Charge of Making Decisions Based on Consultations, and 2) Making Decisions based on Thinking and Logic.

**Being in charge of making decisions based on consultations.** All 12 participating female SSAOs noted that they began their work in their institution by conducting one-on-one informational interview with each employee in their unit. They then developed effective relationships through building trust and consulting with the employees before making decisions. Female SSAOs reported that they have constant consultations with employees in their unit or other expert individuals inside and outside campus such as lawyers. The difference is that the majority of female SSAOs reported that they had a one on one information interview with the employees to ask them about
their views on campus at the beginning of their careers. However, other leaders had a one-on-one consultation with the employees only when they face an issue. According to Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958), leaders have the choice to have a one on one conversation with their team members when they fix an issue and also when picking the team members who have the necessary expertise to handle that issue.

*Making decisions based on thinking and logic.* All 12 participating female SSAOs asserted that the process of decision-making during early years was described as making rational decisions based on the ability to determine what is the best solution for handling a given problem. For example, all participants noted that they relied on logic and effective judgment to identify solutions for handling urgent situations. This finding supports Nakitende’s (2012) findings in his study that explored what makes female senior leaders aspire to leadership positions and persist in leading colleges and universities. He found that female SSAOs are keen to make rational decisions through consulting with staff and other administrators. When female senior leaders make decisions about handling difficult situations, they tend to slow down to analyze facts and form their judgment.

**Sub-theme 3: Making Decisions Now.** This third subtheme described the current experiences of the participating female SSAOs in decision-making and it was divided into four emergent elements. However they were exceptionally integrated, so I combined them into two emergent elements: 1) Becoming More Confident to Make Decisions, 2) Participative Decision Making When Necessary.

*Becoming more confident to make decisions.* All 12 the participating female SSAOs noted that they gained self-confidence by making effective decisions and nurturing relationships, which allowed them to be trusted by administrators and
empowered in their positions. There are some studies that align with these participating female SSAOs’ perspectives of gaining confidence to make important decisions. For instance, in higher education institutions, female administrators often work hard to excel at handling their work tasks, which allowed them to boost their confidence. According to Dunn, Gerlach, and Hyle (2014), senior female leaders who work in higher education institutions describe successful leaders as being able to trust individuals within their institutions through working collaboratively and building internal and external networks with the right individuals. Woollen (2016) in his study of the pathways and performances of female presidents, found that female presidents develop effective relationship with a variety of individuals and develop partnerships with different constituencies within their institutions. They also handled large-scale financial projects successfully, which increased their confidence. As a result of this confidence, these female presidents received more responsibilities in their positions.

**Participative decision making when necessary.** All 12 participating female SSAOs stated that it is important to seek employees’ input before making decisions when these decisions require their engagement as well as it is very essential to do research and consultations before making decisions. This result is consistent with previous findings in the literature that addresses how professional leaders engage employees in making decisions within the workplace. For example, employees’ participation in making decisions is highly appreciated by leaders and is associated with the necessity for making high quality decisions. When professional administrators aim at making effective and efficient decisions they tend to seek their subordinates’ input (Halberg, 1987; Maccoy,

**Discussion of Theme 3: The Challenges Female SSAOs Faced in the Process of Decision Making**

Theme 3 responded to the research question, “How do they describe the challenges of decision making in the workplace?” From the analysis of the female SSAOs’ responses of their challenges, this theme is categorized into six sub-themes: 1) Difficulty Making Large Scope Decisions, 2) Challenge of Balancing Work and Family Life, 3) Workplace Political Challenges, 4) Facing Gender Discrimination Behaviors, and 5) Women Can Be the Cause of Their Challenges.

**Difficulty making large scope decisions.** Nine of the participating female SSAOs reported that the process of making institutional decisions (such as financial decisions and hiring diverse employees) was a significant challenge. For example, making decisions at the institutional level may require gathering many individuals’ inputs such as staff, students, faculty members, administrators and board of trustees, which is time consuming and lots of work. These women also may face difficulty in increasing diversity on campus, such as hiring people of color, which put them under pressure or criticism. This result is consistent with previous findings in the literature. Collins (2009), Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, and White (2015), and Rogers (2017) found that meeting excessive work demands in colleges and university is a major challenge for female administrators in their work environment which make these women function under intense emotion and subject to constant accountability. For instance, when these women make important decisions, they are held accountable for all consequences that
could happen within their institution.

**The challenge of balancing work and family life.** Seven of the participating female SSAOs reported that it is very challenging to achieve and maintain a healthy professional/personal life balance within this role due to its demands and large scope of responsibilities. This result is consistent with previous findings in the literature. Spurlock (2009) in his study of work, family, and social life experiences of female CSAOs found that these women are having difficulty achieving work/life balance and unable to have social lives. He also found that these women, in particular mothers, are prone to feeling guilty and have concerns due to inability to maintain balance. Female CSAOs noted that they spend most of their time meeting work demands and less time in their personal or social lives.

**Workplace political challenge.** Nine of the participating female SSAOs stated that dealing with problematic employees or individuals who do not like certain decisions could be overwhelming. This finding aligns with Herdlein, Kretovics, Rossiter, and Sobczak’s (2011) study that investigated the experiences of workplace politics among student affairs administrators in the United States. Herdlein et al. (2011) concluded that all higher education institutions deal with institutional politics and 100% of student affairs professionals including Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSAs) reported that they deal with politics which impact policy development and the process of making decisions. These administrators were dealing with figuring out who have the authority or power to make decisions at the institutional level. VPSAs also reported handling stressful interaction with employees in their institutions and managing strained relationships with upper level administrators, midlevel administrators, and faculty members or students.
Facing gender discrimination behaviors. Seven of the participating female SSAOs felt that they were not taken seriously by some male administrators, which was a challenge for them while handling their work tasks. For instance, some male administrators undermine female SSAOs’ ability to make effective decisions or doubt their knowledge. Furthermore, four participating female SSAOs stated that upper level male administrators tend to make important decisions without seeking their input and the “Good Old Boys Club” still existed in the work environment. This finding is similar to findings in the literature. According to Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, and White (2015) and Spurlock (2009) in their studies, female senior leaders in colleges and universities are held to different expectations in terms of handling work tasks than their male counterparts. These female leaders were expected to be decisive in order to be involved in making decisions. However, they were not seen as capable of handling leadership responsibilities compared to their male peers. These female leaders also work under continuous supervisions of their actions and some employees want to see them failing. People also doubt their qualifications for leadership positions and criticize their decisions.

Excluding women from making institutional decisions can happen at any level in higher education institutions including the upper level administrations. Sabharwal (2015) in his study of the challenges that female executives face in the field of Senior Executive Service (SES) in federal agencies, found that the female executives were left out of making decisions at the organizational level as well as faced unequal treatment in payment, promotions, and workload. In addition, Ballenger (2010) in his study of the experiences of women who aspire to leadership positions in higher education institution,
found that male administrators develop exclusive networks or inner circles within their workplace that do not include women. They tend to engage in multiple male activities such as sports and keep important information to themselves. Moreover, these male administrators discuss important matters in their institution and reach decisions regarding, such as employees or students, without discussing these decisions with their female colleagues. Therefore, female SSAOs may still face gender discrimination within their work environment.

**Women can be the cause of their challenges.** Five of the participating female SSAOs noted that women could present challenges for themselves. For example, they let fear of failure affect their behaviors within the workplace particularly when making decisions or aiming for promotions. This finding was not identified or supported in the literature. According to these participating female SSAOs’ perspectives, it is true that the fear of making poor decisions while handling work responsibilities can present a significant challenge that puts these women under constant stress. In addition, three of the participating female SSAOs stated that women can be highly competitive and not supportive of each other due to the fact that women’s access to highest leadership position is still challenging and limited to men. Some women are eager to be invited to conversations in an inner circle that is comprised mostly of men. In addition, these women compete against each other for promotions to top positions. Some senior female administrators become highly aggressive, create challenges for other women within workplace, and are unsupportive of each other’s decisions. Therefore, fear of failure can be a hindrance for female SSAOs’ success.

**Discussion of Theme 4: The Strategies Female SSAOs Used in the Process of**
**Decision Making**

Theme 4 responded to the research question, “How do they describe different strategies of decision making in the workplace?” From the analysis of the female SSAOs’ responses about the strategies that they used while making decisions, this theme is categorized into five sub-themes: 1) Learning the Importance of Supporting Decisions with Evidence, 2) Being Unafraid to Take Ownership for Making Decisions and Taking Risks, 3) Receiving Personal Support by Creating Work-Life Balance, 4) Learning to Overcome Gender Discrimination While Handling Work Responsibilities, and 5) Learning How to Deal with Workplace Politics Including Problematic Employees.

**Learning the importance of supporting decisions with evidence.** All 12 participating female SSAOs stated that they make decisions based on evidence and they take this process seriously through using multiple sources of information which make individuals respect them as an SSAO, such as doing research, consulting with experts, or checking policies. This finding is similar to findings in the literature. For instance, according to Dunn, Gerlach, and Hyle (2014), female senior leaders in different colleges and universities noted that successful leaders must be able to use data collection as a major technique for making financial decisions. This finding is supported by findings by Kerrigan and Jenkins (2013) who examined the spread of the culture of evidence among administrators, faculty and staff at community colleges in Washington State to improve students’ outcomes. They found that all employees see using data to make decisions is important. They also found that more than 80% of the administrators use data to make decisions in handling institutional matters such as managing enrollment and retention, or allocating resources.
**Being unafraid to take ownership for making decisions and taking risks.**

Eight of the participating female SSAOs noted that it is important for women to free themselves from the fear of failure and make the right decisions based on their evaluation of the situation and take ownership of these decisions. This finding is similar to findings in the literature. For instance, Christman and McClellan (2008) noted that female top and middle level administrators in some colleges and universities demonstrate strong leadership actions such as expressing authority, having perseverance, being highly motivated to succeed, and extremely avoiding failure. Additionally, Montague (2011) in his study of female SSAOs’ leadership styles at public and private institutions found that female SSAOs take moderate risks through making effective changes within their institutions. When these women take an action or announce a decision, they own it.

**Receiving personal support by creating work-life balance.** Six of the female SSAOs who participated in this study concluded they need to find balance between their work and personal life while handling their job responsibilities. This can be achieved through having a support system such as a cooperative significant other, involvement with sons and daughters in social activities on campus, and exchanging workload with other parent employees. For example, a parent employee may take workload of another parent employee for some time and then the other one would pay the favor forward for the first one. The findings by Collins (2009) and Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, and Gregoy (2005) align with this finding. These researchers found that senior and mid levels student affairs administrators reported that administrators are responsible for maintaining balance between their personal and professional life through focusing on what is important and consulting with mentors. These professionals also build work-family life integration
through engaging their family members in social activities on campus.

Learning to overcome gender discrimination while handling work responsibilities. Six of the participating female SSAOs noted that they overcame gender discriminatory behaviors through projecting strong leadership presence, standing up against bullying, and being transparent with employees. These actions allowed them to build trust with employees and be empowered by female supervisors. The difference is that senior leaders, in their institutions, should prevent gender discriminatory behaviors. Sahoo & Lenka (2016) noted senior leaders need to monitor their work environment to see if there is a culture of macho among employees, such as bullying or gender biases behaviors and excessive workloads. They also suggested that senior leaders should prevent gender stereotypes regarding women in leadership through providing psychosocial support for women. Senior leaders also exercise their power to achieve equality among employees. Additionally, some researchers have reported that senior leaders in colleges and universities may need to appoint more women into top leadership positions due to their positive impact on employees and work environment (Baskerville-Watkins & Smith, 2014; Hamidullah, Ricucci, & Pandey, 2015; Melero, 2011; Sahoo & Lenka, 2016). For instance, when skillful female leaders hold top leadership positions in different types of organizations, they increase their organizations’ productivities. These women also increase employees’ equal participation in decision-making as well as they excel at exercising their authority. As a result of this competency, these women correct stereotypes about female leadership.

Learning how to deal with workplace politics including problematic employees. Four of the participating female SSAOs noted that they were transparent and
openly discussed workplace situations with employees, resulting in having more understanding of workplace politics and handling conflict with employees. This result is consistent with previous findings in the literature. For instance, Herdlein et al. (2011) found that all VPSAs reported that it is important for leaders to be able to identify the sources of power within their institution and to know who has the authority and needs to be involved in making certain decisions. All VPSAs also reported that they handle workplace politics and they spend 50% of their time managing problems such as stressful interactions with employees.

**Discussion of Theme 5: Handling Crises on Campus**

Theme 5 responded to the research question, “If they believe they have handled a crisis, how do they describe their decision making process while handling a crisis on campus?” These responses are organized into four sub-themes: 1) Crises on Campus, 2) Making Decisions During Crises, 3) Challenges Faced During Crises, and 4) Strategies for Handling Crises on Campus.

The first sub-theme discussed the most common crises that occurs on campus, according to the female SSAOs’ beliefs and experiences in four emergent elements: 1) Student Death on/off Campus, 2) An Incident Resulting in Severe Damage to Facilities, and 3) Active Shooting on Campus.

There was an exceptional integration among these emergent elements so I combined them into one element that is Crises Types on Campus.

**Crises types on campus.** All of the participating female SSAOs noted that a major crisis involves any severe incident that affects individuals and disrupts daily operations and infrastructure on campus. These crises can be student death on/off
campus through suicide. In addition, other crises involve large fire, active shooting, high profile arrest, flue epidemic, protest or racial issues, terrorist activities, and severe weather or earthquakes. This result is consistent with previous findings in the literature. According to Benjamin (2014), Covington (2013), Garcia (2015), Wesaw and Sponsler (2014), and Zdziarski, Dunkel and Rollo (2007), SSAOs in all types of colleges and universities in the United States regardless of their size handle crises on their campuses and develop emergency plans to deal with severe incidents. These incidents could be psychological concerns, preventing suicide, alcohol or drugs abuse, and violence. SSAOs reported that they manage any severe event that disrupts normal operations on their campus which can be suicide, severe weather, fire, and sexual assault, tornados, kidnappings, earthquakes, evacuating campuses, terrorist activities, and floods.

The second sub-theme that resulted from this theme discussed how female SSAOs make decisions while handling crises on campus. This sub-theme was discussed in diverse emergent elements, such as forming decisions independently.

**Forming decisions independently.** Eleven of the participating female SSAOs noted that they make all necessary decisions, contact the employees or individuals who must be involved in this process, and distribute the tasks among them during handling crises’ situations. This finding is consistent with previous findings in the literature. According to Garcia (2015), Gardner, Miller, Barker, Loftin, Erwin, and Maurin (2007), Karim (2016), and Maccoy, Champagne, Siegel, and Vaccaro (2013), student affairs administrators, in middle or top level positions, use adaptive decision making style in which they adjust how they make decisions regarding what needs to be done when they handle a crisis situation. These professionals reported that it is important for leaders to be
extremely flexible to do what it takes to deal with the situation. Moreover, they need to focus on what is important to be done first such as following the protocols and delegating tasks to the trusted people within their teamwork. They also consult with the right individuals such as experts, peer administrators, and supervisors.

The third sub-theme that resulted from this theme discussed the challenges that female SSAOs faced while handling crises on campus. This sub-theme was discussed in diverse emergent elements: 1) Facing Barriers to Effective Communication: 2) Uncertainty While Making Decisions: and 3) The Challenge of Insufficient Preparation.

**Facing barriers to effective communication.** Eight of the participating female SSAOs noted that they faced difficulty in interacting with individuals and issuing statements about what happened to informing the public. For example, female SSAOs calm upset and panicked students, parents, and employees. They also decide what information needs to be revealed to the public and they work to prevent the spread of rumors. Most upper level leaders found that communicating with people during a crisis situation is stressful. The findings by Brennan and Stern (2017), Garcia (2015), and Roshan, Warren, and Carr (2016) align with this finding. Garcia (2015) investigated presidents’ crisis leadership in higher education institutions in the State of Florida. He found that presidents handle crises under the pressure of the public and stakeholders accountability. People expect them to handle the situation effectively by protecting the institution, which allows it to perform its normal operations and secure its reputation. These presidents know that they are accountable for their work during a crisis so they excel at handling the situation though working in transparently and with integrity.

Moreover, according to Brennan and Stern (2017) and Roshan, Warren, and Carr (2016),
decision makers in business sectors used social medias’ platforms to communicate with stakeholders during crises. The decision makers also issued an apology for stakeholders for what happened as a result of the crisis and posted it through Facebook or Twitter. They denied any rumors and reminded the stakeholders of their previous accomplishments as well as addressed many objections or negative comments posted by those individuals.

**Uncertainty while making decisions.** Seven of the participating female SSAOs noted that it is difficult to be completely in charge of managing a crisis situation because it is challenging to avoid being consumed with negative emotions of the incident or face difficulty collecting all information quickly. Some researchers found that top-level leaders in colleges and universities can be full of doubt of their decisions during extreme incident due to the negative impact of a tragedy. As a result, leaders may not think clearly and they do not have full information about the incident due to lack of training or experience about how to handle those moments (James & Wooten, 2005; Treadwell, 2017; Wang & Hutchins, 2010).

**The challenge of insufficient preparation.** Three of the participating female SSAOs reported not having sufficient preparation for emergency situations, such as effective communication systems for handling crises. However, many researchers found that poor preparation for handling crises can go beyond preparedness for physical environment; it involves leaders’ lack of preparedness. For instance, James and Wooten (2005), Treadwell (2017), and Wang and Hutchins (2010), concluded that SSAOs including, other top-level leaders in higher education institutions, can be unprepared psychologically and professionally for handling large scale incidents such as natural
crises, high profile crises, and unintentional incidents. These senior administrators were consumed with fear of how to handle crises situations and the future impact of these incidents on their institutions. They also were overwhelmed with meeting their professional obligations, and they experienced feelings of guilt due to increasing workloads as a result of dealing with the tragedy’s impact. Moreover, these institutions did not have effective protocols or clear plans for dealing with severe crises such as the incident at VirginiaTech.

This fourth sub-theme that resulted from this theme discussed the strategies that female SSAOs used while handling crises on campus according to their beliefs and experiences. This sub-theme was discussed in various emergent elements: 1) Being emotionally stable in order to handle the situation, 2) Effective Communication with Individuals, and 3) Effective Preparation for Handling a Crisis.

**Being emotionally stable in order to handle the situation.** Eleven of the participating female SSAOs stated that no matter how intense a crisis, leaders need to be calm and be able to make necessary decisions in terms of handling the incident, such as following protocols and contacting the appropriate individuals who need to be involved in dealing with these incidents. Top-level leaders in higher education institutions need to be in charge of making decisions during a crisis situation. According to Brennan and Stern (2017), Menghini (2014), Karim (2016), and Garcia (2015), top-level leaders and their subordinates must gather information from experts to make decisions quickly and effectively. They need to work to minimize the damage of an incident immediately, even without collecting all necessary information about that incident. They must be emotionally stable in order to manage the situation effectively and interact with different
people such as employees, students, parents, and public on social media.

**Effective communication with individuals.** Seven of the participating female SSAOs realized that they needed to effectively communicate with employees, students, and individuals in the external community during a crisis moment. Female SSAOs also reported that they should immediately contact employees who are involved in handling the crisis situation. These women also direct the employees to do their tasks and carefully form statements with employees in Public Relations about the incident to inform the public. The findings by Garcia (2015), Menghini (2014), Roshan, Warren, and Carr (2016), and Brennan and Stern (2017) align with this finding. Menghini (2014) and Garcia (2015) found that presidents and crisis administrators in different types of colleges and universities handled crises through effective communication with employees and delegating tasks. These presidents and crisis administrators make all-important decisions such as forming a team of administrators and assigning tasks to each employee according to their skills. Furthermore, Roshan, Warren and Carr (2016) and Garcia (2015) concluded that top-level leaders issued statements about crises situation and shared with stakeholders. They also communicated with stakeholders and the public on social media and responded to their concerns.

**Effective preparation of handling crises.** Six of the participating female SSAOs found that it is important for leaders to prepare themselves, employees, and students to deal with difficult moment. For example, these women learn crisis management protocols to follow them during extreme events such as fire, student death. They also regularly practice tabletop exercise scenarios on campus. They reflect after a crisis happened to learn about the deficiencies in their system and how they manage it to prevent the
incident from reoccurring. This finding is in consistent with other findings in the literature. Brennan and Stern (2017) concluded that top level administrators and their staff should establish constant professional training for handling crises on campus such as increasing crisis leadership proficiencies through conducting real simulation of crises’ scenarios. Leaders and their staff also need sense danger signals, for example, extreme anger which could lead to a crisis situation, such as protesting. Leaders also must quickly be in charge of handling the issues to avoid more negative consequences. Furthermore, Jacobsen (2010), Treadwell (2017) and James and Wooten (2005) found that SSAOs including top-level leaders develop organizational learning after a crisis occurs in their institution. These leaders form committee that is comprised of the right people within their institution such as administrators, faculty members, and staff. There would be several meetings for planning, debriefing and assessing. They also write policies or adjust certain processes within emergency plans to prevent similar crises from happening again.

**Implications for Stakeholders**

This last section included an in-depth discussion of the findings of this study as well as their interpretation. These findings were discussed in five themes that resulted from an analysis of data that explored the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers. This data also could be utilized to address the challenges that female SSAOs faced while making decisions and inform them of the nature of this position. This section will provide the researcher's voice regarding several points that were presented in the last section as well as recommendations to the stakeholders, such as higher education institution administration, female SSAOs, new female SSAOs, student affairs professionals, and female administrators.
Capitalizing on the Strengths of Experienced Female SSAOs

Based on the findings of this study, I believe that the experiences of female SSAOs regarding the transition in decision-making style, the challenges faced, and the strategies utilized played an important role in describing the experiences of decision making across their careers. All 12 participating female SSAOs had a strong background and rich experiences that helped them build necessary skillset for making effective decisions and handle their work responsibility as competent leaders. Six senior participating female SSAOs in this study had extensive and rich experiences in decision-making throughout their careers. These women held this position for almost 25 years and have rich knowledge and experiences in this field so they should be considered scholars in the administration of student affairs sector.

These experienced participating female SSAOs projected a high care for competency and exercised a high level of authority through making impactful decisions in their institutions. They demonstrated a high level of leadership effectiveness while handling their responsibilities. Being in charge of work, supporting decisions with evidence, consulting with experts, and engaging the right people in making decisions is what makes these women competent leaders. All participants and, in particular these six experienced participants’ first priority is to think how decisions may affect students and they are keen for student development and success, so they seek students’ input when necessary.

Based on the experienced female SSAOs’ narratives and perspectives, I thought of how higher education institutions could benefit from the experiences of these women and how new female SSAOs might learn from them. Experienced female SSAOs should
be highlighted as mentors for other female SSAOs or female administrators, student affairs professionals, staff, and women who seek this position. Although the experienced female SSAOs faced gender discriminatory activities during their early years in this position, they were able to overcome these challenges and exercise their power. Given the strength of experienced female SSAOs’ knowledge, these women should train younger and new SSAOs to be empowered within their work environment. Higher education administrators should continue consulting with experienced female SSAOs regarding students’ issues related to student retention and success.

These experienced female SSAOs provided rich description of their experiences in decision-making while handling work responsibilities in this position. These rich experiences of decision-making should be documented in textbooks that can be taught in student affairs programs or other professional development workshops, and conferences. Moreover, I believe it is important for higher education institutions to listen to experienced female SSAOs’ recommendations regarding student development and success. Colleges and universities should invite their experienced female SSAOs in classes in student affairs programs to share their recommendations concerning decision making, so young professionals can learn from them.

**Lessons Learned from the Twelve Participating Female SSAOs Regarding Their Experiences in Decision Making**

According to the participating female SSAOs’ experiences and perspectives, being flexible in this role is a major skill in making effective decisions. Because many female SSAOs hold an advanced degree such as Ph.D. or Master’s and have many experiences and credentials, I believed in the beginning of this study, that they would talk
about being responsible or collaborative as the most important skillset while making decisions. However, I believe that female SSAOs constantly are facing unexpected difficulties, changes, and initiating shared visions, such as making large-scope decisions. Consequently, they needed to learn a lot through their time in the position. I believe that female SSAOs should be flexible to adjust their decisions making process. In addition, as more things change or responsibilities increase, they should keep learning new skills, such as financial proficiencies or writing policies, which is a part of being flexible. They also should be open to change their skills and behaviors. They also should be updated on new laws and regulations. All the female SSAOs in this study improved their growth through the years by continuing to learn how to make effective decisions for their institutions and students.

Additionally, making impactful decisions collaboratively is expected from female SSAOs. Based on multiple studies, I believed in the beginning of this study, that female SSAOs oversee, supervise and work with a large number of individuals within their institution. For instance, they work with presidents, student affairs administrators, staff, and they interact with students. In addition, most female SSAOs are responsible for increasing diversity and inclusion on their campus. Thus, they work collaboratively and inclusively with these stakeholders when they make important decisions. I believe that female SSAOs are expected by the presidents to work collaboratively. Most female SSAOs see making decisions collaboratively is an effective style to work toward an inclusive environment. The bigger the decision, the more individuals are involved in it. Female SSAOs also may seek input from other voices; not only employees but also students.
Lessons Learned from the Twelve Participating Female SSAOs Regarding the Changes in Decision Making Experiences Throughout Their Careers

The experiences of most of the participating female SSAOs indicated that they faced challenges at the beginning of this role, and then they learned, and developed confidence over time. Such challenges will occur even if they were highly prepared to receive this position. However, other participating female SSAOs were confident once they received this role due to receiving support from their colleagues or developing effective relationships. Due to the fact that these women have the right credentials and multiple experiences, I believed that all female SSAOs would be confident in making decisions during their early years. I also believed, based on multiple studies, that female SSAOs often hold advanced degrees. So all these participants had effective credentials such as PhDs, master’s, or professional degrees. Prior to being an SSAO, they worked in several different positions that allowed them to gain expertise such as teaching or business skills and administrative experiences. I believe, according to a number of the participating female SSAOs’ experiences or perspectives, female SSAOs in the beginning of this role may experience uncertainty of how to handle work tasks, fear of making wrong decisions, feeling alone in this position, and being stressed due to lack of rules or regulations. Women who aspire to reach this position need to be familiar with these issues.

Regarding making decisions while handling work tasks, the participating female SSAOs make some decisions individually and other collaboratively. In the beginning of this study, I believed that the participating female SSAOs had the option to make decisions either individually or collaboratively. I also believed that these women engaged
employees in decisions only based on the level of their competencies. However, I believe that it is not about these women having the option to make decisions individually or collaboratively, it is about how these women must make some decisions individually and others collaboratively. According to the female SSAOs’ experiences or perspectives, I believe that some decisions can be made individually and other decisions collaboratively. Although making collegial decisions is expected of these women at this administrative level, how they make decisions depends on the nature of the decision. For example, these women consult with the individuals who have the expertise that they want and take their input into consideration when a decision requires their input. However, when the decision does not require input from individuals these women make that decision alone. Therefore, stakeholders need to realize that female SSAOs make participative decisions when there is a need for it.

Importantly, regarding utilizing logic in making decisions, I believe the participating female SSAOs made decisions at the beginning of their careers based on logic and then developed their abilities to make decisions based on facts. More importantly using logic and critical thinking is mandatory for these women throughout their careers.

**Lessons Learned from the Twelve Participating Female SSAOs Regarding Challenges Faced While Making Decisions**

The experiences of all participating female SSAOs indicated that they understood that they would inevitably face challenges about their decision making. Such challenges will occur even if the SSAOs excel at making decisions, follow laws and policies, consult with the right people, or support their decisions with evidence. The most important
challenges that female SSAOs faced, and that I will discuss next, appear to be classified into three categories: challenges from problematic employees or from other individuals with whom SSAOs should communicate decisions (e.g., parents or students), challenges from gender-biased employees, and challenges from systematic bias.

Because facing angry or problematic individuals is a major challenge for all participating female SSAOs in this study, other female SSAOs probably need to realize that their positions will require that, at some points, they face angry or uncooperative employees, students, and parents as well as difficult supervisors. There are many reasons that people might not like decisions that an SSAO must make. Some decisions, such as legal decisions, might involve information that cannot be shared or discussed with everyone because of confidentiality requirements. Some students, parents, or organizations may threaten to sue the institution and even the SSAOs. The SSAOs may need to discuss employees’ poor work performances. In some cases, faculty members will not cooperate with student affairs administrators because those faculty members have a limited understanding of the nature of student affairs work. Female SSAOs need to be familiar with such difficulties in order to prepare themselves to handle them and to negotiate the stress under which they work.

Regarding facing gender discrimination while making decisions, some participating female SSAOs in this study faced challenges from gender-biased employees. In the beginning of this study, I believed that all participating female SSAOs face gender discrimination behaviors, such as being excluded from making important decisions. I believe, according to the female SSAOs’ experiences or perspectives, this is very much true as indicated by seven of the participating female SSAOs, which is a large
number of the participants. These participants also faced gender discrimination in which they were not taken seriously by their male counterparts or were left out of making important decisions. Moreover, women also might work against each other in this position, such as not being supportive of each other’s decisions. Thus, learning about the difficulty of these participating female SSAOs may allow other female SSAOs to know that they may experience some of these challenges.

According to the participating female SSAOs’ experiences and perspectives, I believe that a number of female SSAOs in this study are still working under systematic biases. Female students affairs young professionals, women who aspire to the position, and female SSAOs, including the new ones, need to realize that there are systematic biases in order to make informed decisions while seeking this position. In the beginning of this study, I believed that all participating female SSAOs worked under systematic biases, in which they find this role demanding due to increased workload and time consumption. In addition, I believed that female SSAOs in this study might not be able to maintain work/life balance. I believe that the participants faced systematic biases, which are a result of an excessive workload in that female SSAOs oversee several colleges or departments, units, and manage a large number of individuals. Most participating female SSAOs faced difficulty in maintaining balance between work and family life, such as working longer hours or not having a social life. In this position, it is common to see women work under stress, or be consumed with fear of unknown. This role is still designed for men since they may not have additional responsibilities at home/ or because they are supported with their wife. Therefore, those female SSAOs who faced the same
challenges may realize that they are not alone and any woman in this position can go through the same difficulties.

**Lessons Learned from the Twelve Participating Female SSAOs Regarding Strategies Used While Making Decisions**

The experiences of all participating female SSAOs indicated that they strive to make high quality decisions through utilizing evidence and multiple sources to collect data. They also relied heavily on consulting with mentors, such as an administrator in the presidents’ cabinet or another SSAO who has the same experiences or situation before. Moreover, they mentor their staff through providing training, delegating tasks, or/and consulting with them. Regardless of these SSAOs’ age or years of experiences, it would be an opportunity for other female SSAOs to utilize their strategies when they make small or large-scope decisions. These strategies, along with the results in this study, also could help in preparation and training female SSAOs including women who aim to seek the position, such as administrators or student affairs professionals. Next, I will shed light on the most important strategies that female SSAOs utilized including recommendations to the stakeholders which I classified into three categories: eliminating the systemic bias, understanding workplace politics, and overcoming perfectionism.

Regarding eliminating the systemic bias on female administrators, I believe that higher education institutions should continue applying affirmative action laws in their institutions. They need to continue to hire more women into top leadership positions, in particular, hiring women of color. Top-level administrators should develop a policy or promote the culture of treating women as people. Female SSAOs should be treated with respect and courtesy regardless of their appearance or sexual orientation. In addition,
when individuals interact with female SSAOs, the individuals should focus on the work the SSAOs accomplish, not their gender, appearance, skin color, or other such extraneous factor. More importantly, based on the participating female SSOAs’ perspectives, the design of the SSAO role is structured in a way that was historically suited for men, and it remains more suited for men more than for women today. That is, the role today is very demanding, has a large range of responsibilities, and is time consuming. In the past, male SSAOs could and would invest time and effort in their positions and would gain workplace satisfaction as well as promotions and higher salaries. At the same time, society encouraged women to stay at home, so a wife of a male SSAOs would maintain the couple’s home life and would serve as the main caregiver to their children, allowing the husband to focus on his job. Today, female SSAOs are expected to fulfill their positions with the same energy and focus as males have done in the past, while they are also expected to engage in many of the traditional female roles of raising a family and maintaining a home. To encourage and support female SSAOs, higher education upper level administrators need to consider re- structuring SSAO roles in ways that allow women to function well and to have a personal life.

Moreover, regarding the interaction female SSAOs have with people while making decisions, I believe it is extremely important for these women to understand their workplace politics and to remain calm during stressful situations, which will be part of the job. For instance, female SSAOs should know who has authority and power in their workplaces to be able to participate in making effective decisions. They also should be careful in their interactions with administrators, staff, deans, and faculty members as the female SSAOs make decision without stepping on toes or by stepping on as few toes as
possible. Moreover, calmness and transparency when dealing with unhappy individuals will always be important. When dealing with aggressive people, female SSAOs need to know how to remain calm and be assertive at the same time, as aggression will worsen any tense situation. Finally, having a sense of humor to release stress when facing unexpected problems or turbulence is effective.

Importantly, female SSAOs should avoid falling in the trap of seeking perfection rather than seeking excellence. All participating female SSAOs in this study felt that they were empowered in their work responsibilities due to having most of the authority and autonomy they need to make decisions at the institutional level. As a result, the participants may tend to overthink their decisions and may struggle with self-accountability as they often reflect a great deal on decisions they have made. I believe that female SSAOs, and other women administrators in higher education, should not undermine their own power with such concern. Female SSAOs should overcome the fear of consequences of their decisions or of increased accountability from peers, staff, and more senior administrator or from the public. It is time for female SSAOs and all women to uplift each other within workplace. They also should support each other to reach higher administrative positions within their institutions. More importantly, when female SSAOs face discrimination or disrespect, they should speak up, discuss the discrimination or disrespect, and document the situation.

Lessons Learned from the Twelve Participating Female SSAOs Regarding Handling Crises on Campus

Regarding handling crises on campus, according to female SSAOs’ perspectives and several studies, I believe female SSAOs and other women administrators need to be
aware that they should have emotional stability in order to handle the situation effectively. Female SSAOs should realize that during a crisis it is not the time for emotional vulnerability or uncertainty. These women need to expect that they may handle a crisis situation alone by making all decisions independently. During a crisis moment, employees or supervisors might not be supportive in addition to everything might not be very helpful. For instance, students, parents, and some employees can be emotionally exhausted. These female SSAOs may not receive support from their supervisors or experts as well as communication system might fail. Handling a crisis situation requires full presence because this process requires making many decisions independently and delegating multiple tasks to the people who need to be involved in dealing with that situation. I believe that student affairs professionals, faculty members, and students should be cooperative during a time of a crisis. They also should be supportive of every effort that female SSAOs including student affairs professionals make in order to increase safety on campus.

**Recommendation for Future Researchers**

This study can be a beginning point for future researchers to continue the research on this topic. The structure of this study in terms of the topic, design, diverse participants and interview procedures allowed for collecting a variety of in depth data. Utilizing semi-structured interviews added flexibility during data collection. It allowed for asking additional questions to the participants and adjusting the interview questions according to the participants’ experiences. The structure of this study also allowed for reaching more diverse populations, which included access to a wide range of female SSAOs who have diverse demographics, backgrounds, and experiences. This variation allowed for
capturing rich and various experiences in decision-making throughout SSAOs’ careers. A similar phenomenological study could be conducted by exploring the experiences of female presidents in decision-making across their careers.

Future researchers may conduct this study utilizing a larger and different population. Future researchers may conduct this study using a larger sample size that could incorporate a quantitative or mixed method within its methodology. Future researchers may conduct a similar study utilizing interviews and incorporating additional tools, such as the observation of these women within their work environments while making decisions in a meeting. A future research on the experiences of female SSAOs in decision making across their careers should be conducted through quantitative methods and collecting data through survey.

Moreover, future researchers may conduct similar studies utilizing a variety of populations within higher education or different sectors, such as female presidents, vice presidents for academic affairs, female executives, and female principles. It is important to conduct the same study on women who work in different top level administrative positions to allow higher education systems to understand areas that need modification within these roles to allow women to be more comfortable functioning while having a balanced work/family life.

Future research should be conducted based on the gaps or specific parts of this study. For instance, research should be done based on female SSAOs’ perspectives of the change in decision making throughout their careers including their future expectations. A similar study should focus on certain elements of this study, such as exploring effective strategies that female SSAOs use for making decisions in depth. Another research also
may focus more on female SSAOs’ experiences in handling crises on campus including in depth descriptions of the role of every employee involved in handling the situation and how they make decisions. Furthermore, limited to no literature exists on the importance of female SSAOs’ experiences in strengthening student development or leadership on campuses, in particular in times of crises. Future research may focus on a topic that was not addressed or explored extensively in the literature.

This study could support policymakers and higher education leaders to implement the strategies of decision-making as well as design inclusive top-level environments for female SSAOs that are free of gender discrimination. The results of this study along with the best strategies that are important for leaders to make effective decisions, could be used as an important training that needs to be provided for female SSAOs or women who seek this position.

Professional development should focus on training female SSAOs to overcome fear of making wrong decisions. Professional development also should prepare female SSAOs to be confident in facing or stopping increased accountability or criticism from people regarding their decisions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study in light of experienced female SSAOs, in particular the younger ones, indicate that female SSOAs have the needed authority and power to make effective decisions in their work environments. It is normal for these women to face challenges while handling work responsibilities and to figure out necessary strategies for dealing with those difficulties. Female SSAOs are able to handle large scope crises on campus in addition to describing their experiences during these severe moments. These
women also showed that they are capable of handling leadership roles through their competencies and accomplishments. Sharing the experiences of female SSAOs is necessary for encouraging other women who aspire to the role to make informed decisions. The spread of the knowledge of this study can also be essential for other female SSAOs’ success and empowerment as leaders within their work environments. Fear is the main obstacle for holding women back, so it is important to take female SSAOs’ strategies into consideration in order to overcome challenges regarding making decisions. It is valuable to further explore and listen to female SSAOs’ recommendations regarding taking moderate risks and to make change at the institutional level.
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Appendix A

HSIRB Approval Letter
Date: November 5, 2018
To: Nancy Mansberger, Principal Investigator
    Somaia Mustafà, Student Investigator for dissertation
From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair
Re: IRB Project Number 18-10-25

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Female Senior Student Affairs Officers Experiences in Decision Making Across their Careers” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). 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 to 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 IRB 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: November 4, 2019
Appendix B

Brief Consent Form and Demographic Questionnaire
Appendix B

Online Survey

Dissertation Title: The Experience of Female Senior Student Affairs Officers in Making Decisions Across their Careers.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Nancy Mansberger.
Student Investigator: Doctoral Candidate, Somaia Mustafa.

Western Michigan University
Department of: Educational Leadership, Research and Technology

Thank you for being interested in my research project on the experiences of female Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO) in making decisions throughout their careers. You may be invited to take part in my dissertation project if you meet the criteria of this study. Your participation is appreciated and selecting participants is based on this study’s criteria which are: (a) identify as female, (b) hold the position of SSAOs or (equivalent title), (c) work at a Midwestern higher education institution, and (d) have three to 25 years of experience as SSAOs.

In this dissertation project I want to find out more about female SSAOs’ experiences of decision-making during their first few years in this position. I am also interested in their current decision-making styles as well as their experiences when they handle crises on campus. It eventually will focus on the challenges that they face and the strategies that they use during this process.

If you are interested in participating in this study you may complete a brief demographic questionnaire below. Participants can fill this survey, which should be completed in no more than three minutes. The participation in this study is voluntary. I will keep your information confidential and protect your identity. You have the choice to not answer any question that you pick. Completing this questionnaire will be considered as your consent for participating in this study.

If you are selected to participate in this study you will receive a consent form that explain your rights.

The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) at Western Michigan University approved this study on November 5, 2018. For further questions about this study, you may contact my chair, Dr. Nancy Mansberger at (269-387-4307) or email her at nancy.mansberger@wmich.edu or contact me at (269-548-5759) or email me at somaiahamza.mustafa@wmich.edu. You may also call the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269-387-8293) or the Vice President for research at (269-387-8298).
I have read and understand the information above. I will consent to participate in this study by signing my name below.

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**Demographic Questionnaire**

For the purpose of my dissertation project, I must only interview female SSAOs who meet the criteria that I selected for this study. I also must be able to provide in-depth understanding and description of my participants’ features as well as their professional information. Therefore, please take a few minutes to complete this brief demographic questionnaire.

Name: _______________________________
Contact Office Address: ________________

Email: _______________________________
Phone: ______________________________
Best day and time you are available: ______________

1. Gender: _____ Female _____ Male _____ Other __
2. Age: ___ 35-45 ___ 46-55 ___ 56-65 ___ 66 and over
3. Degree program: ___ Bachelors ___ Master’s ___ PhD ___ Professional degrees (MD, JD, etc.) Other ___________
4. Discipline (if any): __________________________________________________

What is your race (mark all options that apply)?

1. Black or African American 2. White or Caucasian 3. American Indian or Alaskan Native
7. Other: ______________

Years of experience as SSAO: __________

Position Title: __________________________________________________

Type of institution you work in:
1. Public University          2. Liberal Arts College        3. Private University
4. Small Private College    5. Community College    Other: -----------------

How long have you been in the position?

A. 1-2  B. 3-10  C. 10 – 25  D. 26+ more----
Appendix C

Email to Participants Who Do Not Meet the Study’s Criteria
Appendix C

Email to Participants Who Do Not Meet the Study’s Criteria

Greetings (participant’s name)

Thank you for being interested in participating in my dissertation project on the experiences of female Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO) in making decisions throughout their careers.

I appreciate that you are willing to participate in my study as a volunteer. The purpose of this email is to inform you that you did not match this study’s criteria. After your completion of the demographic questionnaire your responses indicated that you did not meet the strict guidelines that are designed for participation in this study.

I value the time, effort and energy that you put in being interested in my study. For confidentiality I would like to inform you that I will remove the information you inserted in the demographic questionnaire. This information cannot be retained. I only keep your name and contact information in the case I develop similar research in the future and I may need to contact you.

For any questions about the guidelines of participation in this study please contact me at (269-548-5759) or email me at somaiahamza.mustafa@wmich.edu.

Kind regards

Somaia Mustafa

Western Michigan University
Appendix D

Email to Participants Who Meet the Study’s Criteria
Appendix D

Email to Participants Who Meet the Study’s Criteria

Greetings (participant’s name)

Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation project on the experiences of female Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) in making decisions throughout their careers.

After your completion of the demographic questionnaire, I found that you met the criteria regarding the participation in this study. These criteria are: (a) identify as female, (b) hold the position of SSAOs or (equivalent title), (c) work at a Midwestern higher education institution, and (d) have three to 25 years of experience as SSAOs. I appreciate your unique contributions to my study and value your participation. I also appreciate the time you took to fill out the demographic questionnaire.

The purpose of this email is to identify a date and time to set up the interview, send you a consent form, and pick a pseudonym for yourself.

Please include the following details in your reply to this email.

In order for me to schedule an interview with you I would like you to pick a time, date and location that works best for you. During the following weeks I am available on Wednesdays from 10 am to 4:00 pm, Thursdays all day, and Fridays all mornings to 5:00 pm. In addition, I have a private room reserved at the library in your campus for conducting the interview.

If these times and dates do not work for you please suggest a date that is convenient for you.

Additionally, if there is an issue with this location, please inform me, and I will make other arrangements that are more convenient for you. After the data, time, and location are finalized, you will receive a conformation email. Conformation emails will be sent two days before your scheduled interview date.

This study is designed to allow participants to remain anonymous; therefore, please select a pseudonym that will act as your name throughout your participation in the study and use it when you reply to this email.

Typically, interviews will last for 60 - 90 minutes. However, the most important thing for me as a researcher is to leave enough time for you to tell your stories and communicate your experiences as thoroughly as possible. Therefore, if your schedule allows it, please reserve up to 3 hours in your schedule, which would allow us time for short breaks in
case we need them during the interview. If you only have limited time and would like more, then we can reschedule another time to complete your interview.

Attached is a copy of the consent form to this email. Please take time to thoroughly read the form and confirm both your understanding of the content and your intent to participate in the study by signing the consent form. Keep in mind that the signed consent form must be received by me, either via email or in person, before the interview can be conducted. We will review the consent form together in person just before the interview begins. During the interview I will ask you some semi-structured open-ended questions. This means I will ask questions that help in capturing your full descriptions of your experiences; there are no right or wrong answers.

Please reply to this email in two days. If I did not receive your response during this time I will send you a reminder email.

For any questions or details please contact me at (269-548-5759) or email me at somaiahamza.mustafa@wmich.edu.

Kind regards

Somaia Mustafa

Western Michigan University
Appendix E

Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology

Principal Investigator: Nancy Mansberger, Ph.D.
Student Investigator: Somaia Mustafa, Doctoral Candidate
Title of Study: Female Senior Student Affairs Officers’ Experiences in Decision–Making Across their Careers

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "Female Senior Student Affairs Officers’ Experiences in Decision–Making Across their Careers." This project will serve as Somaia Mustafa’s dissertation project for the requirements of the doctoral degree in the Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology at Western Michigan University under the supervision of Dr. Nancy Mansberger. 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.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
I would like to know about the experiences of female Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) who work in colleges and universities in the Midwest regarding their decision making throughout their careers.

Who can participate in this study?
Women who work as SSAOs in colleges and universities in the Midwest in the United States in addition women who have experiences in working in this position between three to 25 years.

Where will this study take place?
You will be interviewed face to face when possible in a private place that we will suggest together. However, if not possible to conduct the interview face to face we will arrange it using available technology (Skype, Face time, telephone, etc.).

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
You will be asked to participate in an interview. This interview will take one to three hours based on how much information you choose to share and how many short breaks we might need.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
You will be asked to share your demographic information such as age, gender, ethnic and racial identities, education, and years of experiences. In addition, you will be asked to provide your position title, marital status, and type of institution you work. You will be asked about your work background and reflect on your experiences within the position of SSAOs as well. You are also will be asked to provide answers to the interview questions and our conversations will be audio-recorded. Later, you will be asked to review my interpretations of your experiences and provide feedback to see if the information is accurate or not. I might call you for follow up questions or if I need you to clarify any information.
What information is being measured during the study?
You will be asked to answer questions in an interview format. These questions will focus on your experiences in your career.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
The risks of participating in this study are limited. However, the risks can include physical or emotional inconvenience through the interview. You may take short breaks to avoid being tired during the interview. If the interview questions cause physical or emotional inconvenience you can stop answering them at any point.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
You might benefit from being aware that you are a participant in a study that gives a voice to female SSAOs. Your notions might help in understanding the experiences of female SSAOs in decision making within the workplace as well as having a comprehensive knowledge about their challenges that they face. Your participation can also help other women who aspire to seek this position to make informed decisions about their career choices.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
No.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
When I finish working on this study, I will write assignment about the information that I collected from you. However, I will not share your name in this assignment. I will use a pseudonym instead of your actual name across my study and within this assignment. Your confidentiality will be protected by the law. All information that I collected from you, including transcripts, recordings, and formal forms will be secured inside my own filing cabinet and locked. In addition, I will download the materials in an encrypted external hard drive. When I complete the study, I will keep all the transcripts, recordings, and formal forms in the office of my chair for three years and then all the data will be destroyed.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can decide to stop participating in the study at any point or any time. You will not be subject to prejudice or penalty for not completing your participation for any reason. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study. The investigator 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 primary investigator, Dr. Nancy Mansberger at (269-387-4307) or email her at
nancy.mansberger@wmich.edu. 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. Subjects should not sign this document if the corner does not show a stamped date and signature.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

______________________________________________________________________________

Participant’s signature               Date
Appendix F

Interview Reminder
Reminder Email for Scheduled Interview

Greetings (participant’s name)

I look forward to conducting an interview with you for my dissertation project on your experiences as a female Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAO) in making decisions throughout their careers. The purpose of this email is to remind you about the interview we have scheduled. Our interview will last from 60 to 90 minutes and is schedule on:

Date: 
Time: 
Location:

I would like to remind you that while our actual interview is expected to last more than last a maximum 90 minutes but we might need to reserve three hours to allow a time for short breaks as needed.

Thank you again for your interest in participating in my dissertation project, and I am excited to learn about your experiences and listen to your thoughts. If you have any question please feel free to contact me.

Kind regards

Somaia Mustafa

Western Michigan University
Appendix G

Interview Protocol
Appendix G

Interview Protocol for Female SSAOs in the Midwestern Institutions.

Pseudonym: __________________________ Date: ___________
Location: ____________________________ Time: ___________

Introduction:

• (Including a statement to introduce myself) Hi, my name is Somaia and I am a PhD student in the Educational Leadership Program with a specialty in Higher Education. I am conducting a study concerning the experiences of female SSAOs in decision-making across their careers. For this study I will ask the same questions of all my participants. I am going to ask you a broad set of questions around a specific topic to help you tell your stories. This initial interview should last approximately 60-90 minutes. Our conversation will be recorded so that I can refer to it later when I am analyzing all participant data. Would you be interested in participating in this study?
• (Make sure this is being recorded) So to get started, can you affirm that you understand that this interview is being recorded? Do I have your permission? Please can you verbally express your consent so I can record it.
• Please take a time to review this consent form and if you have questions please ask. Be sure to sign this form before we begin.
• Please select a pseudonym to be used instead of your real name during this study, and please make sure that this pseudonym is private so no one can easily identify you.
• At this point, if you do not have any questions I would like to begin our interview.

Interview Questions:

1) First of all, tell me about yourself where did you work and went to school what are some of the things that you are identified by in the workplace.

2) What does it mean to you to be a SSAO? How would you describe your role? Responsibilities?

3) Think about when you first started in the role as an SSAO? Describe it.
4) Describe your decision making during those early years as an SSAO? What guided you? How did you prioritize you actions, etc.?

5) How did you feel about the interaction with others?

6) Describe how do you make decisions or handle work’s responsibilities now?

   Prompt: Please share an example?

7) How do you feel about the interaction with others now?

8) Tell me about some of the challenges you have faced while making decisions or handle work responsibilities?

   Prompt: Can you share an example?

   Prompt: What was it like for you to face those challenges?

9) What strategies do you use in your professional life when making a decision?

10) Have you handled any crises on your campus? If so, briefly describe the situation and how you handled it?

11) What were the challenges and the strategies that you used to manage the crisis?

12) Do you have any additional questions that you feel I need to ask to better understand your experiences?

13) Are there any final thoughts that you think are important to add?

Note: these questions were adjusted according to each interviewee’s responses and additional subquestions were asked to assist the participants to elaborate on their responses.
Appendix H

Member Check Email
Appendix H

Greetings [Participant’s last name],

I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you about your experiences of decision making across your careers as an SSAO. As we mentioned during the interview, I audiotaped the interview and then I transcribed it into a Microsoft Word file. Please review this transcript during the coming two weeks. After reading the transcript please respond to the following questions:

1. Does this transcript of our interview reflect what you hoped to share? If not, what would you like to add?
2. Does my transcription of your experiences about decision making across careers reflect what we discussed during the interview? If not, what seems inaccurate?
3. Is there something that you would like to add or clarify regarding your experience?

This transcript might include some grammar issues that you might be self-conscious or embarrassed about, but please be sure that your thoughts and ideas are what is most valued to me. During the analysis process, I will use your narratives but I will edit any grammar issues that I might see. Please note that you are not required to read or comment on this transcript, however, any clarification might assist in understanding your experience.

Thank you again for continuing to participate in my dissertation project and I appreciate you took the time you took to share and review your thoughts with me. I am eager to receive your feedback soon.

Thank you

Somaia Mustafa

Western Michigan University
Appendix I

Member Check Reminder Email
Appendix I

Greetings [Participant’s last name],

I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you about your experiences of decision making across your careers as an SSAO. As we mentioned during the interview, I audiotaped the interview and then I transcribed it into a Microsoft Word file. This file includes the text from the interview. Please review this transcript during the coming two weeks. After reading the transcript please respond to the following questions:

1. Does this transcript of our interview reflect what you hoped to share? If not, what would you like to add?
2. Does my transcription of your experiences about decision making across careers reflect what we discussed during the interview? If not, what seems inaccurate?
3. Is there something that you would like to add or clarify regarding your experience?

This transcript might include some grammar issues that you might be self-conscious or embarrassed about, but please be sure that your thoughts and ideas are what is most valued to me. During the analysis process, I will use your narratives but I will edit any grammar issues that I might seen. Please note that you are not required to read or comment on this transcript, however, any clarification might assist in understanding your experience.

Thank you again for continuing to participate in my dissertation project and I appreciate you took the time you took to share and review your thoughts with me. I am eager to receive your feedback soon.

Thank you

Somaia Mustafa

Western Michigan University