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Invisible student support: A qualitative exploration of the professional staff experience and relationships with students in higher education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

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in Education

by

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ABSTRACT

Invisible student support: A qualitative exploration of the professional staff experience and relationships with students in higher education

by

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This dissertation presents three separate studies related to the experiences of university professional staff, including their work stress and relationship to undergraduate students. Findings from these studies show that professional staff are well-positioned to act as institutional and empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) on behalf of students. Positioning a positive student-staff relationship as a powerful and empowering aspect of the university experience for students, a deeper understanding of factors contributing to or diminishing the strength of that relationship, as well as their impact on staff work stress, can help improve the experiences of both university staff and the students they serve.

The first study presents a qualitative investigation into the work-stress experiences of six university professional staff with student supervision responsibilities from different institution types. Drawing on Folkman and Lazarus' (1984) conceptual framework, descriptions of staff work motivation were solicited, as well as sources of and influences on stress. Findings illustrate the complexity of student-staff relationships and how they impact the staff experience.

The following two studies explore positive student-staff relationships within a single university from both the staff and student perspective, respectively, to further investigate the perceptions and impacts of these relationships. Through qualitative

interviewing with exemplary campus staff and students who have formed positive relationships with staff members, these studies revealed several behaviors and strategies that positively influenced the relationship between university staff and college students, including the ways in which staff were seen to act as institutional and empowerment agents. Importantly, student perceptions of these supportive relationships illuminate the myriad ways that staff can foster positive relationships with college students and impact their experiences, including leveraging campus knowledge and networks to support them. Findings from these studies suggest recommendations at both the individual and institutional levels that could maximize the potential for professional staff to build positive relationships with students and enhance both the staff and student experience.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Professionalization of higher education

Previously viewed as an exclusive opportunity, participation in higher education is now seen as more a common experience and has grown significantly in the twentieth century. In 1970, the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions globally was 29.4 million. By 2006, this number increased to 141.5 million (Freeman, 2009). In a competitive job market such as the United States, a college degree is now almost considered necessary to enter the professional workforce in many industries. In 2019, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting institutions was 16.6 million students (NCES, 2021).

As part of the expansion of higher education, institutions are now expected to do more than provide students support to meet their academic goals. Universities are expected to also provide student support necessary "for successfully operating a university and for helping students succeed" more broadly (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018, p. 1692). This support includes providing extracurricular opportunities and development to students including recreation, jobs and internships, and non-academic programming to name a few, in addition to providing physical, psychological, and social support. Key to these institutional efforts are the professional staff who assist in the day-to-day functioning of the university across a variety of roles (Graham, 2012).

Between 2000 and 2012, universities across the country grew their workforce by 28% (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014) to support their institutional goals. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term "professional staff" is defined as university

employees who are not directly responsible for the academic education of students, such as faculty. Professional staff make up nearly half of all higher education employees in the United States (Bossu & Brown, 2018) and the hiring of professional staff continues to outpace the hiring of faculty (Frye & Fulton, 2020). While research on professional staff is challenging given the diversity in roles and responsibilities, as Busso and Brown (2018) state, "they are essential to ensure the effective and efficient running of a campus" (p. *v*). Without these professionals, the university would cease to function in the capacity to which it is expected.

With additional professional staffing, however, comes additional cost. It is now estimated that universities in the United States allocate an average of 60-70% of their total spending on employee compensation, of which instructional faculty make up less than half of the spending (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). Hiring and retaining increasing numbers of professional staff comes at no small cost to universities, so researching and investing in their professional well-being, growth, and retention in their positions is of paramount importance particularly in our current context. We are currently in the midst of what has been referred to as the "Great Resignation" (Thompson, 2021), leaving many universities understaffed. Throughout the pandemic, it is estimated that over 550,000 higher education jobs have been lost, with staff of color and those in lower-paid positions disproportionately affected (Bauman, 2021). To add to the loss, many staff are choosing to move universities for new opportunities or leave higher education entirely (Ellis, 2021). Attracting qualified staff is going to be more challenging and will require intentional efforts on behalf of the university.

Yet, despite the growing numbers of professional staff and financial investment from universities, we know very little of the professional staff experience and the role that they play in positive student outcomes within the university. In its entirety, this dissertation serves as a testament to the work that staff do, both operationally and through the ways they assist in the socialization of students in the university setting. Given the pre-pandemic growth of this population, it is important that we more fully understand the role(s) they play on campus and illustrate the ways in which they positively impact the students they serve.

Understanding student-staff relationships

What can be seen from the literature on student success is that educational actors or institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) can play a pivotal role in the experiences of students, and particularly low-income and first-generation students (Bassett, 2021), as well as students of color (Luedke, 2017; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Looking at the impact of relationships with institutional agents such as a faculty or professional staff on college students, it can be seen that their relationships with students can positively influence their academic success (Hanson et al., 2016; Means & Pyne, 2017) and even encourage students to pursue graduate education (Hanson et al., 2016; Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019; Trolian & Parker, 2017). Along with academic support, positive interactions with faculty and administrators can support students in their social endeavors at the university. Palmer and Gasman (2008) found that faculty and administrators played a key role in encouraging student participation in campus organizations, internships, and scholarship programs. In a qualitative study of informal support for Latinx/a/o undergraduate students

by graduate students, participants stressed the importance of these institutional actors in making students feel welcome on campus (Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019).

While these key institutional actors can include faculty, administrators, and professional staff, the latter group is noticeably absent in the research on positive student outcomes, with little research exploring student-staff relationships specifically (Bensimon, 2007; Luedke, 2017), despite professional staff making up the majority of employees at most college campuses (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). Additionally, in the context of research universities, faculty may have less time to counsel students individually (Milem et al., 2000), leaving more responsibility for student support to professional staff. This gap has been criticized (Bensimon, 2007; Graham, 2012; Graham, 2013; Graham & Regan, 2016; Roberts, 2018), because "although much emphasis is placed on the role of academics in promoting successful student outcomes, academics contribute to a relatively small number of services and facilities compared to professional staff" (Graham, 2012, p. 600). Professional staff possess much of the "systemic knowledge, the intellectual capital" (Graham, 2012, p. 439) that are key to university operations (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018) and as such, have access to significant sources of capital that could benefit students both academically and socially. Additionally, the student-staff relationship is markedly different than the student-faculty relationship in that students may feel more comfortable opening up to professional staff and seeking support when needed (Luedke, 2017).

Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital framework provides an insightful lens which positions these professional staff as *institutional agents*, with the capacity to act as *empowerment agents* and share valuable social capital resources. For working-class, first-

generation college students and students of color, these institutional agents are integral in their success and have had a positive impact on students by building trusting relationships, going above and beyond their assigned duties to be available for students when needed and sharing a common identity (Dowd et al., 2013; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Museus & Neville, 2012). Reconceptualizing professional staff as individuals with the capacity to act as institutional and empowerment agents given their campus knowledge and connections, it can be seen that professional staff play an important role despite their absence in the literature relative to other university groups (e.g., faculty).

Research and professional interest

My own professional experiences underpin this dissertation, and rather than attempt to set them aside, I hope to embrace those experiences and use them to enrich our understanding of the contributions of professional university staff, and in doing so, advocate for greater institutional support for this population. This acknowledgement is important within qualitative research and I aim to maintain transparency with the reader to acknowledge the ways in which this research cannot be separated from my own experiences (Hill et al., 1997; Merriam, 2002). My own experiences working with students is what brought me to this research. I have worked at a public, California research university for nearly eight years and my work requires me to supervise a large team of students. What I found throughout my career is that my relationship with students goes far beyond what one might consider a typical supervisor-supervisee relationship and my interactions with students are a grounding force within my work.

Professional development and supporting student growth make up a significant piece of my approach to student supervision, however, I have found that in building relationships with students over time, I have come to know them deeply as student learners, emerging professionals, and young adults. Through both quick interactions and deeper check-ins, I have come to learn about their goals and aspirations, family and friends, as well as the challenges they are facing in various aspects of their lives. I am deeply humbled by the ways in which students have allowed me to share in the highs of their successes, as well as their lows, including students dealing with abuse, navigating financial insecurity or homelessness, addiction, serious illness, and heartbreak. In this way, I have seen how some students may come to view me as not only a professional resource, but a personal advocate as well.

This is where this dissertation begins. While my support of students is a minor piece of my job description as a visitor center administrator, I have found it to be the most impactful. I have personally felt the excitement and joy when students share their acceptances to the graduate school of their dreams or have landed their first post-graduate job. But often student issues have taken precedence. In these instances, meetings must be canceled or missed, projects postponed, and other aspects of my work set aside in order to support students in their moment of need. My work with students profoundly impacts me both in and out of the workplace.

I know that I am not alone in this. This is not my attempt to professionally grandstand, but rather to acknowledge that staff across campus, in a variety of roles, may experience similar things. For those who work in less traditional student support roles such as myself, our relationships with students influence our workplace experiences.

Those relationships also influence students, for better and for worse. While negative interactions can undoubtedly impact and even harm students, my focus throughout this research is to explore positive relationships and understand what student-staff relationships can look like at their best (Luedke, 2017; Museus & Neville, 2012). In doing so, we can begin to uncover the role that professional staff have in supporting positive student outcomes. We can then also begin to paint a more complete picture of the contributions of professional staff at the institutional level. By recognizing the contributions that professional staff make, we can then advocate for the support and resources they need to do their job(s) more effectively on behalf of students and improve their workplace experiences. This is particularly important in our current context with the higher education workforce impacted heavily by the pandemic (Bauman, 2021; Ellis, 2021). At its foundation, I come to this research committed to the two ideas that: 1) professional staff across all roles have the potential to positively influence students and 2) if we are to maximize their influence, we must better understand *and address* the needs of staff within the university. If we leave professional staff out of our understanding of college student support, we are missing a critical piece of the student experience and perhaps doing a disservice to the many ways in which they can be supported through the university.

Dissertation overview

This dissertation presents three unique studies to help illuminate student-staff relationships from both a staff and student perspective. Through qualitative interviews, this work presents an explicit focus on professional staff and the ways in which they can support and empower college students. Addressing a critical gap in the research on

college student socialization and success (Bensimon, 2007), this dissertation takes a step toward necessary inclusion of professional staff in our considerations of how college students are supported through the university. Following a three-study format, each chapter within this dissertation is presented as an independent paper, with theory and analysis that are unique to the purposes of that particular study. As a result, some of the chapters will include similar literature and theory, with some repetition throughout the entirety of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 presents a novel look at student-staff relationships through a qualitative investigation into the work-stress experiences of university professional staff who supervise student employees. Despite making up more than half of all university personnel (Bossu & Brown, 2018), professional staff are largely absent from the work stress research in university settings. This chapter gives voice to the experiences of several university staff who supervise student employees to elicit their unique experiences with stress in the workplace, guided by a transactional framework proposed by Folkman and Lazarus (1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Participants included six visitor services staff members drawn from three different institution types in California, interviewed across two phases during the pandemic.

Findings from this investigation illustrate the complexity of student-staff relationships, particularly within an employment context. Professional staff were found to be highly motivated by their work with both prospective college students and their student staff, valuing their relationships and ability to help students navigate through and beyond the university and support their growth. However, we also see that their interactions with students are a potential source of work stress. Influenced by greater

sociohistorical factors, students are facing more severe crises, many of which extend beyond the resources that staff participants have able to support them. We also see how the pandemic has exacerbated existing work stressors, as well as generated new ones as staff navigated university shutdowns.

The unique duality of student relationships as both a professional motivator and stressor found in *Chapter 2* served as the catalyst for the following two studies. In *Chapter 3*, we focus on what exemplary student support from professional staff can look like from the staff perspective. Through interviews with staff across a variety of levels and roles within a single university who were nominated for a prestigious campus award in recognition of their support of students, we can see the diverse ways in which professional staff approach their work with students. Utilizing a social capital framework such as that presented by Stanton-Salazar (1997; 2011), we can see how staff are able to leverage their institutional knowledge and networks to connect students to important resources and opportunities in the support of their growth and development.

Interviews with these staff revealed that a common and significant professional motivator was the ability to form relationships with college students and support them even beyond graduation. By eliciting important qualities or practices of these staff, we can characterize what exemplary staff look like and identify behaviors at the individual level that may help staff to better support students, including making themselves available to listen to student needs, proactively addressing gaps in student support, and extending their campus networks to students. Findings from this study also reveal the ways in which professional staff have the capacity to act as *empowerment agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) for college students. Finally, staff identified campus barriers in

their work with students, informing institutional recommendations to improve the staff experience and maximize their potential to effectively support students.

Chapter 4 presents a similar exploration of impactful student-staff relationships; however, participants include undergraduate college students within a single university to better elicit the student perspective and identify the factors that are most important to them when interacting with university staff. Participants included students who were invited given their positive relationships formed with one or more campus staff members. Student participants also completed an online questionnaire in which they were asked to rate the importance of various campus resources in their college experience, which helped to illustrate that a student's ability to form positive relationships with staff is not necessarily isolated to staff who work in offices considered to be most important.

Interviews with student participants revealed key qualities and behaviors among staff members that students considered impactful, including genuine empathy and care for students, a willingness to connect students to resources, and in some cases, a shared background or identity. Findings also highlight the impact that these relationships can have, from an improved sense of confidence on campus, professional or personal growth, and retention within the university. Understanding what students consider to be most important within these relationships help to inform individual recommendations for campus staff in their interactions with students, as well as greater institutional recommendations to foster these connections and relationships more easily.

The final *Chapter 5* of this dissertation presents a summarization and synthesis of key findings from these three studies. From both student and staff perspectives, similarities within the study findings allow us to identify important characteristics and

practices that can enable university staff to better support college students. Additionally, I discuss how these relationships can positively influence students and their college experiences based on results from these studies. Positioning staff as individuals with the potential to act as both *institutional* and *empowerment agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011), I also discuss how this framework presents a model for professional staff and can be used to help us better understand their contributions within the university context beyond their direct operational roles. *Chapter 5* addresses some of the common themes found within the three studies to inform both individual and institutional recommendations to better support professional staff, and therefore, the students they serve. Directions for future research are also discussed in this chapter to promote the inclusion of professional staff in the research on college student support and further enrich our understanding of the role this population plays in positive student outcomes.

Summary

This dissertation presents three separate studies related to the experiences of university professional staff, including their work stress and relationship to undergraduate students. Findings from these studies show illustrate that professional staff are well-positioned to act as *institutional* and *empowerment agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) on behalf of students and can contribute to positive student outcomes on campus. Findings within this dissertation also illustrate important characteristics of supportive professional staff, the impact of positive student-staff relationships on the student experience, as well as needed steps to improve the workplace experiences of campus staff and their ability to effectively support students. In its entirety, this dissertation presents a step towards the

missing, but necessary, inclusion of professional staff in the literature on college student support.

CHAPTER TWO

Work Stress in the University Setting: Perspectives of Student-Supervising, Professional Visitor Center Staff

Introduction

In just the last 25 years, colleges and universities in the United States have nearly doubled the number of professional staff they employ, now accounting for nearly half of campus positions and in many cases, outnumbering faculty (Bossu & Brown, 2018; Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). Yet, despite the increasing professionalization of higher education, limited research exists on work stress experiences for professional staff in university settings. The lack of literature on the experiences of university professional staff has not gone unnoticed and has even led to them being referred to as "invisible workers" (Bossu & Brown, 2018; Graham, 2010; Szekeres, 2004). With this growth, it is important to better understand the staff experience and how they navigate the workplace, including how they perceive and experience stress in the work environment.

In addition to professional staff, student staff in the university setting provide valuable support to other students, particularly under-represented minority (URM) and first-generation college students (Shook & Keup, 2012). Universities are increasingly providing student campus jobs, for example "student ambassadors – peer leader positions often found in admissions offices, visitors' centers, or campus tours- have a significant role in prospective students' first impression of the campus and their subsequent decision to attend" (Shook & Keup, 2012, p. 13). These student staff roles provide benefits to both the students, in the form of professional experience and development, as well as the

university in the form of cost savings. As such, it is important that these students work under the guidance and supervision of skilled and motivated professional staff who can provide them with the skill sets to prepare them for life after the university. Understanding what motivates and what is considered stressful for these student-supervising university employees can assist their organizations in better supporting and retaining them, an issue that is especially salient during what has been coined as the "Great Resignation" (Thompson, 2021). By exploring how individuals perceive and manage stress in the workplace within defined roles, more successful intervention development is possible.

Statement of the problem

Work stress is a global phenomenon most visible in developed countries such as the United States. Under a neoliberal capitalistic structure, organizations are increasingly working in a profit model, meaning productivity is paramount. In this new context, universities are often expected to do more with fewer resources. Occupational stress can pose significant financial costs to the university due to health care expenses, employee burnout, and lost productivity (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994), as well as losses in institutional knowledge and the quality of services due to attrition (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). In some university roles that work closely with students, such as student affairs roles, the attrition rate is already high, with some research finding that 61% of professionals leave within six years (Holmes et al., 1983). Additionally, high levels of stress in the workplace have significant influence at the individual level, as stress can "undermine the quality, productivity, and creativity of employees' work, in addition to employees' health, well-being, and morale" (Gillespie et al., 2001, p. 54). Understanding

underlying sources of stress and developing strategies to mitigate them should be a priority for universities nationwide to create a healthier and more sustainable workplace.

While research has found that faculty, professional staff, and students, are experiencing work-related stress (Ablanedo-Rosas et al., 2011), staff are rarely included in the work stress literature (Graham, 2010; Szekeres, 2004). There has been related research on unrealistic worker norms, burnout, and attrition in roles that work closely with students, such as in student affairs positions, (see Marshall et al., 2016; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Sallee, 2020). However, it is important to not only consider other university staff roles outside of this field, but to identify key stressors that lead to these negative outcomes. By qualitatively exploring the work stress experiences of university staff who employ and supervise students, this study aims to address that gap and improve our understanding of the unique work stress experiences of this population.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The present study aims to address how student-supervising staff across multiple institutions describe their unique experiences with stress in the workplace. Participants include six university visitor services staff members from separate universities who were interviewed about their work stress experiences across two periods of time. Qualitative interviews were conducted with the participants as an opportunity to capture nuanced, individual experiences in a way that traditional quantitative surveys do not allow. Furthermore, this study explores work stress during times of significant historical social and civil unrest, as well as a global pandemic. By applying the transactional framework for work stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this study conceptualizes stress as the interaction between an individual and their environment. Additionally, by viewing higher

education institutions as open systems and boundaries undefined (Scott, 1998), it is not possible to ignore the potential impacts of external environmental factors and turmoil in the individuals' work experiences at the university.

This study was guided by three primary research questions:

1. How do student-supervising, professional staff describe their motivation in their work?
2. What are the situations/scenarios that participants perceive as stressful?
3. What influence do external factors, such as global or national events, have on their experiences with work stress?

These questions will provide a better understanding of what motivates this group of professional staff, what factors or situations are viewed as stressful, as well as gain insight into how national events such as the outbreak of COVID-19 or social unrest impact work stress, if at all. While literature on intentions to leave and attrition resulting from stress and dissatisfaction exists within the realm of student affairs, this study is unique in its focus on university staff who employ and supervise college students and the identification of key stressors regardless of their intentions to leave. Results from this study not only allow us to better understand the unique ways in which these staff who work closely with students are experiencing work stress, but to identify strategies to mitigate it.

Literature review

Universities across the United States are expanding and increasing the numbers of employed professional staff (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014; Frye & Fulton, 2020). For the purposes of this study, "professional staff" or "staff" are defined as those who are not

directly involved in the teaching of students. This includes, but is not limited to, housing services, custodial, human resources, counseling, instructional technology (IT), and admission staff. Those who are directly responsible for teaching students are referred to as "faculty." In the past few decades, the hiring of professional staff has outpaced that of faculty and in 2016, professional staff outnumbered full-time faculty at higher education institutions in the United States (Frye & Fulton, 2020). Despite their growing representation on university campuses, research on the experiences of staff remain largely undeveloped (Bossu & Brown, 2018; Graham, 2010; Szekeres, 2004).

Professionalization of higher education

One contributing factor to the expansion of higher education in recent decades is that institutions are now expected to do more to provide non-academic student support "essential for successfully operating a university and for helping students succeed" (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018, p. 1692). This non-academic support includes providing extracurricular opportunities and development to students such as recreation, jobs and internships, and non-academic programming, in addition to providing physical, psychological, and social support. In the context of the present study, visitor operations staff may offer such support to not only prospective students, but also to current students (e.g., jobs or internships within visitor centers) that support their goals and enhance their student experience. All of these new expectations require increased staffing.

Professional staff make up nearly half of all higher education employees in the United States (Bossu & Brown, 2018) and it is now estimated that universities in the United States allocate an average of 60-70% of their total spending on employee compensation, of which instructional faculty make up less than half of the spending

(Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). While research on professional staff is challenging given the diversity in roles and responsibilities, staff are essential in the operations of a university (Busso & Brown, 2018; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018). Without them, the university would cease to function in the capacity that it is expected to (*Chapter 1*).

Stress in university environments

Despite the growing population of professional staff within higher education, relatively little is known about their experiences around work stress. Though staff fulfill a wide variety of roles and responsibilities on campuses, they are often broadly categorized and loosely defined, if at all. Stress-adjacent research, such as that focusing on burnout and turnover, has explored the experiences of staff who fulfill roles under the umbrella of student affairs, a field notorious for high workload and high rates of attrition (Marshall et al., 2016; Sallee, 2020), but it is important to identify stressors that can lead to these sorts of negative outcomes for staff in other roles in higher education.

What is clear from the literature is that universities are no longer considered low-stress environments with staff and faculty feeling increasing amounts of stress (Ablanedo-Rosas et al., 2011; Darabi et al., 2017; Gillespie et al., 2001; Tytherleigh et al., 2005; Winefield & Jarrett, 2001; Winefield et al., 2003). While there may be increasing levels of work stress across a variety of university jobs, how individuals experience work stress may vary (Brown et al., 1986). Some common themes do emerge when exploring work stressors in the university context and the literature on occupations more generally.

Traditional work stress research tends to focus on three primary work-related stressors: role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload. *Role conflict* refers to an

individual receiving incompatible, or even contradictory, demands or tasks from others in the workplace (Katz & Kahn, 1978). *Role ambiguity* occurs when an individual receives vague communication regarding their tasks or expectations (Katz & Kahn, 1978). *Role overload* refers to an individual being tasked with too many projects or goals to complete within the allotted timeframe or when the tasks assigned are too difficult for that individual to achieve (Beehr, 1995). Most often these three broad categories of role stress are assessed using quantitative surveys.

Results from these surveys have found that higher levels of role conflict, ambiguity, and workload are correlated to lower reported levels of job performance and engagement (Curran & Prottas, 2017; Gilboa et al., 2008) and in the context of education, can contribute to decreased satisfaction and commitment to work (Conley & You, 2009). However, in earlier qualitative studies involving university faculty, role conflict and role ambiguity are rarely reported as stressors by participants (Mazzola et al., 2011; Narayanan et al., 1999). This highlights an interesting discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative research when exploring work stress. Qualitative research allows respondents to identify specific work factors which contribute to their experiences of work stress, allowing for a more nuanced approach.

Role overload is one of the most prominent stressors identified in the literature on work stress in university settings (Ablanedo-Rosas et al., 2011; Gillespie et al., 2001; Liu et al., 2008; Mazzola et al., 2011; Narayanan et al., 1999; Winefield et al., 2003). In their review of qualitative work stress research across various occupations, Mazzola et al. (2011) found that work overload is a relatively universal work stressor. In the realm of student affairs, the idea that staff are expected to do more with fewer resources and be

available at all times is a significant contributor to attrition in the field (Sallee, 2020). Marshall et al. (2016) found that high workload, including expectations outside of normal working hours, was a contributing factor to student affairs professionals leaving their roles. Without intervention, it is possible that increasing workload in university staff will result in negative impacts on performance, job engagement, and satisfaction (Curran & Prottas, 2017; Gilboa et al., 2008; Tull, 2006), as well as leading professionals to leave the field (Marshall et al., 2016).

While increasing work demands and overload are commonly identified as a top stressor in the university context, there is evidence that overload is multi-dimensional. In some cases, work overload is not always perceived by participants as solely a negative stressor (Boswell et al., 2004; Gilboa et al., 2008; Winefield et al., 2003). This perception supports the multi-dimensional nature of stress as described in the transactional model of work stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For some, stressors such as work overload were identified as a challenge with the opportunity for positive outcomes. This type of challenging stress may actually motivate and help retain employees in their organization (Boswell et al., 2004), making it clear that while role overload is a frequent theme, it can be complex.

A second frequently reported work stressor in university settings is interpersonal conflicts with colleagues, subordinates, or managers in the workplace (Liu et al., 2008; Mark & Smith, 2018; Mazzola et al., 2011; Narayanan et al., 1999; Winefield & Jarrett, 2001; Winefield et al., 2003). However, conflict with others appears to be a universal stressor so far in university work stress research. Similarly, perceptions of poor

management or leadership are frequently cited as work stressors for both staff and faculty (Mark & Smith, 2018; Winefield & Jarrett, 2001; Winefield et al., 2003).

These stressors, among others, can negatively impact staff by causing various strains. Strains can be categorized as physical, behavioral, or psychological, but are considered harmful to the individual experiencing them (Beehr, 1995). Mazzola et al. (2011) found that anger, anxiety, and frustration were the most commonly reported psychological strains among respondents across various occupations. Psychological or emotional strains were the most commonly reported strains when looking specifically at university staff and faculty (Liu et al., 2008). Strains can also be physical, including tiredness, tension, headaches, sickness, and trouble sleeping as seen in the university setting (Gillespie et al., 2001; Liu et al., 2008; Brown et al., 1986).

Left unchecked, work stress and their resulting impacts on the employee can lead to poor performance, disengagement from the job, and ultimately, attrition (Curran & Prottas, 2017; Gilboa et al., 2008; Gillespie et al., 2001; Marshall et al., 2016; Tull, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that we better understand the underlying factors surround stress in the workplace for those who work in higher education and are responsible for supporting students. Not only can work stress harm the individual, but they can then negatively impact the experience and success of the students they serve. Understanding these stressors and identifying interventions at both the individual and institutional level can mitigate these impacts and improve employee performance, morale, and retention. If universities intend to create sustainable systems of support for their students, as well as sustainable careers for their staff, addressing this issue is of utmost importance.

Theoretical framework

In exploring stress for student-supervising staff, this study conceptualizes work stress through the transactional model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This conceptual model is one of the most widely used in work stress research and defines stress as a result of the interactions between an individual and their environment and recognizes the ability for each to influence the other. However, rather than simply identifying what stressors exist in a particular role, the transactional model allows for a greater exploration of how individuals react to and perceive their environment. By allowing for exploration at the individual level, the transactional model of stress allows researchers to elicit important information about how individuals experience and define stressors in their workplace. This conceptual framework places significance on an employee's perceived experiences and ascribes to a belief that workers not only participate in their work, but have influence and varying levels of control over their work environment as well (Dollard et al., 2019). Shifting away from traditional job-focused models of stress, this framework allows for a more human-centered approach to what is traditionally considered an objective organizational experience.

A distinctive characteristic of the transactional framework is its emphasis on how individuals perceive and experience their environment through cognitive appraisal (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). The initial, or primary appraisal, is when an individual determines whether an encounter is (1) irrelevant, (2) harmless or positive, or (3) stressful. Stressful encounters can then be furthered categorized as challenging or threatening. Challenging stressful encounters are those which the individual considers stressful, yet perceives as an opportunity for growth or some sort of gain. Threatening

stressors are perceived as putting the individual at risk for potential harm or loss (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). After assessing the encounter as challenging or threatening, individuals then determine their ability to cope with the event in a secondary appraisal. These two appraisals are considered interdependent and ultimately determine how an individual is able to manage their environment and what coping strategies they will use (Hart & Cooper, 2001). When an individual has assessed an encounter as stressful and evaluated their coping resources, they will then employ various coping strategies. For the purposes of this study, while coping strategies were elicited, they are not a central focus of this project.

An important tenet of the transactional model of stress is that stressful encounters are dynamic, and people may experience a variety of emotions in response to them. Individuals may even experience contradictory emotions to similar stressors or appraise situations differently over time (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Additionally, individuals may appraise the same situation in different ways. The complexity of stress appraisal and coping makes this framework an intriguing lens in which to study stress in the workplace and may explain why it is a frequently employed model in stress-research. Transactional stress allows for complexity and a new approach to stress as more than just negative experiences, while centering the individual in their experience. Well-suited for qualitative application, the transactional framework allows for a more complex and nuanced investigation into the individual experiences with stress in the workplace as it relates to professional staff.

Context of the study

At the time of this study, the United States is experiencing significant civil and social unrest. The 2020 Presidential election was highly contentious, exacerbating the political divide and brewing tensions. The global outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in a severe economic downturn and brought the country to a near halt, exposing governmental shortcomings in the face of a pandemic and leaving many sick or unable to work (Nicola et al., 2020). Additionally, the crisis of systemic racism and police violence against Black Americans has been brought to the forefront with incidents of police brutality that have sparked protests nationwide, including on college campuses, resulting in demands for justice and reform.

Universities are not immune to these social pressures and campuses across the country have been responding. This includes campus shutdowns, transitions to remote learning, enhanced student activism, and coping with severe economic losses. These factors have undoubtedly created a unique political environment within universities which makes work-related stress research even more critical (King & Levy, 2012). It is an understatement that these various factors have permeated the daily experiences of workers in universities across the nation and this study examining stress yields insight on how greater social, political, and economic factors may affect professional staff in the workplace. At time when many industries, including higher education, are experiencing high rates of employee attrition and turnover during the "Great Resignation" (Thompson, 2021), understanding and mitigating work stress is increasingly important if organizations hope to grow and retain their workforce.

This study was conducted in two phases, with half of the participants being interviewed during each phase. The first phase took place during Summer 2020. At that time, California was under a stay-at-home order due to the pandemic, with most universities providing the majority of their services remotely. Non-essential staff, including those who work in visitor operations, had transitioned to remote work for the indefinite future and no in-person visitor events were taking place. The second phase of the study was completed in Fall 2021. The pandemic was still a concern at this time with varying levels of restrictions throughout California, but universities had begun to return to in-person operations. The participants during this time had returned to work on campus and visitor operations had resumed with limitations. This context is important in understanding the stressful experiences described by the participants as the conditions were far from what they had typically experienced prior to the pandemic.

Methodology

To address how student-supervising university staff describe their work stress, this study utilized semi-structured qualitative interviews as guided by Patton (2002). Qualitative interviews are intended to allow the participants to describe their own perceptions and experiences with stress in the workplace, rather than being confined to pre-determined topics or subjects imposed by the researcher as would be the case with a traditional stress survey (Mazzola et al., 2011). Following a constructivist tradition, interviews allow the participants to identify and describe their own subjective experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which is important in applying a transactional framework to work stress. Six total participants were interviewed between two time periods (Summer 2020 and Fall 2021).

Participants

Given that there exists a wide variety of university staff who supervise students, it is important to narrowly define the professional staff in focus. Participants included six university visitor services employees who supervise a team of student tour guides or ambassadors at six separate institutions. Usually housed within, or adjacent to, admissions offices, visitor services perform the critical role of orienting and attracting prospective students to the university through programming such as tours, information sessions, and special events. Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) in this way allows for greater clarity on the roles of the participants, as well as their self-identified stressors and motivators within parallel roles in an effort to work towards a deeper understanding of the rich and complex experiences of staff who work within the university.

Information about the participants in this study can be found in Table 1. Participants included two female visitor center staff (one Latina, one White) and four male staff (two Latino, one Asian, and one White). All staff with one exception had been in their roles for at least 1.5 years and four of the six participants have worked in visitor services for 6 or more years (Table 1). The six universities are equally drawn from different institution types within California: (1) University of California (UC), (2) California State University (CSU) and (3) private as outlined in Table 2. The institutions are large, with all but one enrolling over 19,000 undergraduate students. Additionally, each university runs a high-volume visitor program with at least 45,000 annual visitors (Table 2).

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Pseudonym & position title	Age, gender & ethnicity	# of years in position	# of years in visitor services	# of students supervised	# of annual visitors
Stephen Visitor Relations Coordinator	30, Male Asian/White	<1 (8 mo.)	11	50-65	150,000-200,000
Jennifer Tour Program Manager	27, Female Latina	3.5	7.5	120	70,000-77,000
Claire Campus Tour Coordinator	24, Female White	1.5	1.5	60-80	55,000-65,000
Anthony Welcome Center Coordinator	31, Male White	3	6	45-60	45,000-55,000
Daniel Assistant Director	26, Male Latino	4	8	120	~100,000
Gabriel Campus Tours & Visit Coordinator	29, Male Latino	1.5	1.5	60-80	55,000-65,000

Researcher Role

As the researcher, I am the instrument through which the data were gathered, analyzed and interpreted (Conneeley, 2002) and I have a professional connection to the roles of the participants. I have managed the Visitor Center at a public, California research university for the past five years and as such, am connected to this particular line of work. While my position would be considered a supervisory or managerial role, much of my work is likely to involve similar experiences as those described by the participants. I am connected to the participants professionally, and as the researcher, it was important for me be aware of biases that may exist and my prior knowledge. Clarifying questions

Table 2
University Profiles

Institution	Type	Total Undergraduate Enrollment	% of Underrepresented Minority (URM) Students	% of First-Generation Students	Visitor Services Unit Name	# of Professional Staff in Unit
A	Private	7,000	25%	19%	Visitor Center	3
B	UC	31,000	28%	42%	Welcome Center	9
C	UC	23,000	35%	40%	Visitor Center	3
D	CSU	22,000	20%	10%	Welcome Center	1
E	Private	19,500	22%	20%	Admission Center	4
F	CSU	19,400	85%	81%	Campus Tours & Visitor Center	1

were important in establishing an outsider perspective and allowing for the participants to describe their own experiences. Given our positive professional connections, rapport was easier to build during the interview and may have allowed for more comfort regarding potentially sensitive topics such as work stress.

Data collection

The primary data source for this study was interviews with the six visitor center staff. Semi-structured interviews centered around role responsibilities, workplace motivation, and stress were conducted with six participants across two different time periods (previously described). The interview guide can be found in Appendix A. Work stress was considered the central topic of this interview, or the sensitizing concept (Patton, 2002). Questions were designed to elicit the individual's own definitions of work stress (e.g., *When you think of the term "work stress", what does that mean to you?*) as

opposed to questions about particular stressors, such as role overload. Using experience-based questions, reminiscent of the Stress Incident Record (SIR) technique developed by Keenan and Newton (1985), these questions allowed for the researcher to elicit what specific situations or factors the participants identify as stressful.

Three participants (Stephen, Jennifer, and Claire) were interviewed in Summer 2020, whereas Anthony, Daniel, and Gabriel were interviewed in Fall 2021 as an expansion of that earlier project. At the time of the initial interviews, the outbreak of COVID-19 had resulted in the temporary shut-down or closure of most non-essential businesses, including many higher education institutions. All three participants were working remotely and in-person visit programs has been halted. By the second round of interviews for the latter participants, limited in-person programming had resumed and all three participants were working in-person at their respective institutions. All interviews were conducted remotely to reduce researcher and participant risk. Because the participants were invited based on their professional connections with the researcher, it was anticipated that the professional staff status of the interviewer would also facilitate the understanding of the nuances in the interview about the challenges visitor center personnel face. Although one participant was a colleague of the research, the nature of the relationship was professional in nature. Interviews were conducted during the work day and were between one hour and one and one-half hours in length. Participants were reminded that their responses would be confidential outside of the context of the research. All interviewees were compensated with $25 for their participation. Interviews were recorded and verbatim transcripts were created.

Data analysis

Analysis of the interview transcripts was accomplished using a constructivist grounded theory approach as guided by Charmaz and Belgrave (2012). An inductive method, grounded theory allows the data to emerge from the transcripts, and therefore the perspectives of the participants guided the research. The transcripts were reviewed for initial coding to identify primary themes or topics that emerged. From those codes, more selective coding was done to identify the most significant themes or concepts (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). The themes that emerged from each individual interview were then compared to each other to identify similarities as well as any contradictions in the experiences of the six participants. During the analysis process, comments on the transcripts and emergent themes were discussed with another faculty and graduate researcher and any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. Three themes surrounding motivation were uncovered (growth mindset, promoting access to higher education, connections with current students), with three themes among common stressors (supporting students in crisis, lack of support, and pandemic impacts).

Results

Interviews with the participants revealed that their respective journeys to their current roles were similar, though largely unexpected. All six participants held student positions as undergraduates that sparked their interest in higher education work. Four of the six participants were student tour guides or ambassadors themselves, while the others held positions with similar levels of responsibility such as Orientation Leader and Admissions Intern. This student exposure seems to have kickstarted their trajectory, whether knowingly or not. Jennifer noted a shift in identity as a student because she

"never thought higher education was an option for a career," whereas Daniel says that after becoming a tour guide, he "was kind of planning on doing this from day one." Further discussion regarding their professional motivation follows, as the interviews revealed common themes including a growth mindset approach to their work and a sense of meaning through supporting both current and prospective students. Common themes around work stress to be discussed include supporting student through crises, a lack of support in their roles, as well as new and unique stressors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Common motivators

In the context of this study, workplace motivation was not positioned as a positive antithesis to work stress. Rather, the participants' motivations to do the work that they do was elicited to identify any commonalities between participants, as well as any factors that serve as both motivating and stress-inducing in accordance with the transactional stress framework (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). What became clear through the interviews was that the participants were largely motivated by their work with students, including the relationships they build with their student staff and an investment in their growth and development. Additionally, the ability to utilize their position to promote access to higher education to prospective students, particularly those from underserved communities or marginalized groups was considered to be both meaningful and motivating.

Motivation 1: Growth mindset

While most participants described finding themselves working in their professional roles unexpectedly, it is clear that they have significant drivers to do the

work that they do, including a firm belief in a growth approach. Growth mindset is defined as the view that ability, skill, and talent are always capable of being improved through effort and learning (Murphy & Dweck, 2010). Those with a growth mindset are more open to challenges and less fearful of failure since every situation is an opportunity to learn. Participants demonstrated a clear growth mindset with regard to both their own work and professional development, as well as their student staff, which helps to guide their supervisory approach.

One aspect of having a growth mindset is using challenges as an opportunity to learn, whether or not the intended outcome occurred. Stephen described the challenges of having to teach his Director about the new virtual platforms that were being used to host online events. However, even after describing the situation as stressful and frustrating, he stated "if anything, I think it's... maybe it's good because [this teaching] forces me to slow down a little bit and to consider things that I wouldn't normally consider." He expanded on this comment with the assertion that "it may be irritating, but I don't know that's a bad thing." Anthony exemplified this positive reframing by noting, "it's funny to think that some of the most stressful work in my life is also the most rewarding."

The participants also highlighted a strong investment in the growth and development of their student staff. These professionals believe in the value of the tour guide position and find significant fulfillment and motivation in watching students grow over time. Jennifer cited a particularly motivating moment when watching one of her student staff conduct a virtual tour via Instagram and reflecting on his development through various leadership positions. For these staff, growth can include professional development for the students, such as with Anthony who stated he has "enjoyed working

with students to really expand their career opportunities, working with students to expand and really work on those soft skills, the skills that they're learning outside of the classroom." Growth can also extend beyond their student employment reflected by Daniel who said, "just to see [students] grow, go through the self-realization, the self-actualization, the self-authorship. It's really kind of beautiful in a way."

With the participants having experienced similar student roles themselves, they firmly believe in the value and impact of these positions, as highlighted by Claire:

> I really liked working in student affairs when I was a student. I felt like my supervisors were really good mentors and had a good balance of making it fun and enjoyable and building connections amongst the team. It actually felt like a professional growing opportunity. I felt like I was developing skills that I could use in future positions.

Focusing on growth and feedback, Gabriel described being intentional whenever sharing feedback by eliciting suggestions from colleagues, preparing for the conversations, and providing constructive feedback along with tangible goals. The focus is acknowledging the students' success and providing feedback to help them improve, rather than simply critiquing their initial performance, a key aspect of a growth mindset.

Finally, this growth approach is demonstrated by the respect that participants described for their student staff and the desire to give them increased responsibilities. Each center has a smaller student leadership team to help with additional projects or tasks and are given additional responsibilities compared to other tour guides, such as staffing a front desk or answering phone calls to provide valuable support to the professional staff. Many participants gave their students the opportunity to help run tour guide recruitment

and training, while Daniel noted a hands-off supervisory approach. Within these programs, it is clear that students are respected, valued, and treated as paraprofessionals, demonstrated by Gabriel who stated that a lot of his work is "collaborative work with the students, and that's the beauty of the ambassador program and student programming. . . we're really working alongside the students. And really, their feedback is what drives the work."

Motivation 2: Promoting access to higher education

A second significant motivator that emerged from the interviews is that the participants consider their roles meaningful due to their impact (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). This meaning is rooted in the ability to promote access to higher education for prospective students, with a special emphasis on equity efforts. For the participants, this is another motivating aspect of their work as they get to represent higher education more broadly and open doors for students who may not be as familiar with navigating the university.

> In working in this field as a professional staff, that's something that I've become increasingly passionate about and really understanding how we can work within our systems to create opportunity for students who don't necessarily have those naturally. (Stephen)
>
> I get really passionate about providing access and opportunities for students that traditionally don't have opportunities to pursue higher education. And to make sure that we are opening up the light and the lens to being able to be a more equitable space. (Anthony)

For some of the participants, the motivation to help students and families navigate the college process is more firmly rooted in their own personal identities and experiences. For Jennifer, who is Latina and first-generation college student herself, her ability to support Latinx students and families is integral in her work. Initially drawn to being a student tour guide after working with Spanish-speaking families, she cites her student experience in managing multicultural recruiters as a pivotal moment in her career trajectory. While initially pursuing the medical field, she states:

> I decided I wanted to do something that mattered to me. Me being able to navigate through the system as best as I could on my own, I wanted to be that voice, or just [be there] for a student to lean on when they don't necessarily have support at home. (Jennifer)

A desire to assist students of color is also evident in Gabriel's responses, as he describes his motivation in supporting conferences and outreach programs for youth of color. His own background as a first-generation student grounds him in his work, stating, "they all have that imposter syndrome coming from first-generation backgrounds. That's always a motivation. And the students here that I get to talk to that also have very similar backgrounds to mine is also what drives me." A similar drive was reflected in the interview with Daniel, who stated that his own experience as a low-income, first-generation college student has enabled him to better support students and motivates him to help reduce the stress on high school students as they navigate the process.

By approaching their work with an equity-mindset and pulling from their own personal experiences, the participants felt that their work was meaningful and that it mattered on both an individual and societal level as demonstrated by Daniel's comment:

> I know the students that go through here will influence the world and being able to aid in their development knowing, for better or for worse, they will have an out-sized impact on society, it's important. And that also keeps me motivated.

Motivation 3: Connections with current students

Along with prospective students, participants are also motivated by the relationships and connections they build with their student staff. They demonstrate an investment in the students' lives and well-being, even beyond their professional growth. Participants stated that they really enjoy working with current students and sharing in their life experiences. When asked about motivating moments that stand out to her, Claire stated:

> Any time our students get accepted into a graduate program or an internship or they're about to study abroad. Like all these really exciting monumental life experiences, we get to actually be there and see them open that letter or get the call that they got the job, whatever it is. And so, I find those to be really rewarding and positive moments in the job.

Even beyond these shared life moments, participants cited finding enjoyment and meaning in the more informal, day-to-day interactions with students.

> I think in smaller instances though it's just the one-on-one conversations that I would have with students where, you know, they would come in 15-minutes early before a tour and they would just sit down and chat with me in my office and I would ask them how their day was going and learn about all the different projects they were working on and just becoming invested in their lives was really what stood out to me and was most motivating for me. (Stephen)

> I'm relatively young and close to their age, even though they try to make me feel old all the time. They feel comfortable enough to talk to me because I'm pretty open too, being a first-gen student and they know I'm a person of color. So, some of them do feel comfortable to come talk to me and being able to connect with similar backgrounds and things like that where they just come to me for advice. (Jennifer)

As a result, participants demonstrated a commitment to creating an open and welcoming space for their student staff as described by Anthony, "I want to be that person that is called at all hours of the day. That's the work I want. That's the expectation I'm going to set with my students."

Common stressors

While the participants share profound value and meaning in their work, they also shared unique stressors that arise in their work with students. Working with students has required professional staff to provide support in ways that extend beyond the parameters of the tour guide position itself. In some scenarios, participants described being able to connect the student to appropriate resources based on their own professional connections, such as the case with Daniel who assisted his student in getting support for a stalker. However, some of the scenarios these staff face with their students require resources that they perceive to extend beyond their knowledge or training. For this reason, supporting students who are experiencing challenges or crises becomes a source of work stress for these staff. Additional common stressors include a lack of support in their role, as well as new and exacerbated stressors due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stressor 1: Supporting students in crisis

In the process of establishing relationships with the students, these professionals are also confronted with the greater challenges these students are facing in their lives. Regular check-ins with students can provide opportunities to establish and build relationships and share in their successes, but it also opens the door for more serious issues to be discussed. As highlighted by Jennifer, “I enjoy checking in with them, but that can also be pretty taxing. You know, hearing their concerns and wanting to be there for them, but you don’t know how.” Anthony warned, “if someone's never done this role before, they would probably need to know that students see you as a functioning adult when things go south.” Given their connection and investment in the students’ well-being, this can be difficult given their inability to support students in every way that they may need. While participants cited that they enjoy working with students and helping to solve their problems, stress arises when the problems are larger than the participants can solve themselves. The situations that were shared ranged from supporting students who are experiencing housing or food insecurity to substance abuse or addiction and severe mental health crises.

This struggle to support students in crises has been amplified over the past two years with the continued pandemic, national focus on police brutality, the economic downturn, and contentious political climate.

> Our students are also going through a lot, you know. We’ve had students tell us that they’re homeless or that they’re going to BLM protests and that their families kicked them out because of that. Or that they’re sick and they don’t know exactly what to do. These are really real stressors that are not even close to the types of stressors that we were feeling before this. Like these are more serious. They’re

lower on Maslow's hierarchy of needs... it's really like the most basic needs. (Claire)

These types of issues highlight the double-edged nature of working with students. On one hand, these staff get to witness and share in the joys and successes of their students. On the other hand, they are also now faced with more serious life issues that they are not always prepared to handle which can cause significant work stress for the participants.

It is important to consider that as the supervisor for these students, these professional staff are torn between supporting students but also taking care of themselves and their own well-being. On a more personal level, Jennifer highlighted that she was struggling in "making sure that I'm okay but making sure my students are okay" during the initial outbreak of the pandemic. Gabriel noted the challenge in being there to support students during national crises when they impact him personally. He said, "I'm really in it, and I'm thinking about it, and a lot of that stuff really does create stress in my personal life just because I'm so connected to it and I'm always reading up on it."

Additionally, the extra support shown by these professionals can impact their work performance and workload. In the case of Stephen, at a previous institution where he supervised student tour guides and front desk staff, he stated that he was always having to listen in on phone conversations in the case that he needed to intervene and help a student. He describes "constantly having like one ear on that made me feel like I was splitting my focus all the time and couldn't get the work done that I needed to get done" (Stephen). More recently, Daniel described the significantly increased number of students needing to call out of work for mental health reasons, increasing the workload for him and his colleagues. In these ways, while being able to support students is a

motivator in their roles, the challenges that arise in trying to lend that support can create more workload and ultimately work stress.

Stressor 2: Lack of professional support

Along with stress related to the students they supervise, the interviews revealed that these staff also face stress caused by a lack of support in their roles through high workload, ambiguity, and unclear or insufficient leadership. In all six cases, the participant is considered the sole or primary person in their office responsible for the supervision of students. Many participants highlighted this fact, noting that their immediate colleagues do not face the same challenges or always understand what is required in working with college students. As Anthony noted when telling his supervisor about having to support a student in the ER due to substance abuse, “I'm the only person that really has that current student engagement. And so the things that I've had to deal with are things in her career she's really never had to deal with.” This can lead staff to feeling like they do not have the direct office support needed to navigate certain situations with the students.

Participants also described the stress caused by the volume of work that is often required in supervising a large staff of students. At his previous institution, Stephen recalls “consistently putting in like 60- to 70-hour weeks and taking work home with me. That was a big source of stress.” Prior to working remotely, Claire described work stress as “this feeling of not having enough time in the day to get everything done. Running from a meeting to a presentation, back to a meeting, and then having to get some admin things done on the computer.” Gabriel recalled feeling “really not motivated to come to work because of all the workload, the extra workload, that we had.” Daniel even noted

that he and his colleagues sometimes feel *required* to take a hands-off approach in the supervision of their student staff given the large volume.

Some of the participants identified the workload required to manage so many students as being an obstacle in accomplishing all that they want in her roles, including providing opportunities for student development and growth.

> I really want to focus on development of the students because obviously they are involved with so many things. . . there's so many things I want to do, like with the development of the students, that I just don't have time to do because I'm doing the day-to-day operations and making sure everything's okay. (Jennifer)
>
> I'm doing so many small things in the moment that it's hard for me professionally to do bigger projects that require more of my professional skillset, my degree. Like what I would like to be doing rather than like the day-to-day stuff. Like I want to be doing strategic planning. I want be doing more project based things. (Daniel)

As previously shown, providing those growth opportunities serves as a major motivation in this line of work, yet the demand of administrative tasks required to manage so many students prevent these staff in providing those opportunities.

In the case of Stephen, given his short length of time in the role before the pandemic, his experiences with work stress were centered around more traditional stressors, including what he considers to be a lack of leadership, echoed by Jennifer.

> In terms of things that would be most helpful for me, I would really like to have some more clear direction coming from the top. As opposed to somebody who's like, just asking the questions but not proposing solutions or ideas. I'm happy to

> be a part of the team that comes up with solutions or is coming up with the ideas, but it feels like it's all just kind of being dumped on my shoulders. (Stephen)
>
> I feel like work stress usually comes from upper management, like something that comes up or you get told you have to do. Or they don't fully understand what you do and then they try to tell you how to do your job. And it's like, 'do you fully understand what I'm doing?' I feel like that's where a lot of work stress comes from. (Claire)

The issues of leadership and a lack of understanding of their role(s) were also discussed by Gabriel who said, "what would make my life easier, let me just sum it up, is just managers and supervisors understanding the work of the visitor center and just how much it takes." For two participants, challenges and frustrations with leadership became particularly evident with the transition back to in-person operations as detailed later in this section.

Along with frustrations with leadership, participants cited that ambiguity in their role is a source of stress in the workplace. Jennifer recounted a situation where she was responsible for collecting signed forms from her student staff in a short period of time. While the task itself was tedious, she said "just the urgency of it without any clear expectation was really stressful." Stephen described having to learn the admission presentation with "no guidelines to follow. I had to memorize basically an hour-long speech. Yeah, that was stressful." For another participant, the workload itself was not a source of major work stress, but rather a lack of clarity.

> Often the work stress that I feel is not necessarily the deadlines and duties I have but the ambiguity or the unclear nature of the things I'm working on. And the

lack of support from the institution or management or people around me. (Anthony)

Stressor 3: Pandemic impacts

Finally, the ongoing pandemic emerged as a prominent theme, generating new stressors as well as exacerbating existing ones. For earlier participants, the pandemic completely changed the nature of their work by transitioning to remote work, which led to challenges in working from home, a lack of student connection, and uncertainty about the future. For the latter three participants, the transition back to in-person operations and navigating COVID-19 protocols along with campus expectations resulted in increased work stress, amplifying concerns about support in their roles and leadership directives.

For earlier participants who were experiencing remote working conditions as part of a mandatory campus directive, working from home brought with it new challenges including inconsistent motivation and a lack of separation between work and their personal lives. As one participant described, "it's tough now because all the days blend together." In describing her fluctuating motivation, Jennifer stated "I have my good weeks and bad weeks and feel like, 'okay, I can do this'. And other weeks, I'm like I can't look at another screen for any longer."

Earlier participants also described the challenge in spending their entire days at home and being unable to de-attach from work.

> There was no separation. I would just be at home doing all this and then it's like "oh, well, where am I going to go to de-stress?" I'm working from home. For the first couple of weeks of working from home, it was a struggle. (Jennifer)

> Now we pretty much spend all day in the same spot in the comfort of our own home. And so, it's not the sense of there's not enough time in the day. It's more just, I just have to sit here and do everything I need to do. (Claire)

In the state of California, many extracurricular or social activities were also inaccessible at the time, including dine-in eating, bars, movie theaters, and more. Along with this, individuals were encouraged to stay at home and minimize interaction with the community, greatly extending the amount of time participants were spending in the home beyond working hours.

The nature of remote work also greatly impacted the participants' ability to interact with their student staff. With limited remote work opportunities for students, there were simply less opportunities for staff to see and work with their students. As Claire describes, working from home was hard in "removing that aspect of face-to-face human connection, which is what I love so much about my job." Jennifer reflects this sentiment, "I'm used to the constant noise of them. And now I'm just like alone and, like, how am I gonna do work when I don't have them with me constantly?" That ability to interact with students regularly, especially in those more informal contexts, had been stripped away while working from home. Many participants stated that they still met regularly with students virtually, but as Gabriel noted, it was not just the staff who were feeling disconnected. His students were feeling lonely and isolated as well. Overall, working remotely removed so much of the student connection that served as an initial motivator for these professionals in their roles.

The pandemic also generated a greater sense of uncertainty for these professional staff. This uncertainty is particularly pronounced in regards to returning to in-person

work. Earlier participants described being uncertain of the amount of time they would be working from home, and as a result, underestimated the timeline. In the case of Stephen, he was working hard to create a new process in their data system, "thinking we would be on campus much sooner than is looking to be the case." Some participants noted stress stemming from trying to plan the return to campus and in-person operations.

> It's not so much that physical stress, but now when I think about work stress it's much more that uncertainty fatigue that I think a lot of people are feeling. And it's this urgency to try and make a plan, but there's no timeline of when that plan can happen. It's knowing that eventually we will be going back into the office and that will be a huge transition and wanting to prepare for that. But it's also knowing that we shouldn't waste our time and resources on making a plan for, you know, Plan A, B, C, D, E, F, G, when we need more information before we make a plan at all. So, I think that part of it is the uncertainty. (Claire)

For the participants interviewed in Fall 2021, they had returned to campus and were no longer working remotely, but stress surrounding the transition back was evident. In the case of Anthony, because he is the only staff member that oversees campus tours and the student tour guides, he was solely responsible for navigating health guidelines and developing a plan for the in-person transition. He stated:

> I was really worried about student safety. I was worried about folks interacting. I had no concept on how to, you know, if someone gets sick, what do we do? What questions do we need to be asking people coming through the door? How many people are we allowed in the space? How do we move people through the space? What are the requirements for guests? I understand guests might have different

> requirements than currently enrolled staff, faculty and students. Just a heavy duty of expectations, and that led to a lot of work stress.

For Daniel, who works at an urban campus with a lot of public visitor traffic, he describes stress surrounding working with the public and navigating COVID-19 mitigation protocol, such as mask wearing. After sharing that his office is no longer able to leave their doors unlocked due to a visitor who became violent after his staff tried to enforce the mask policy, he recounted the impact of all this stress.

> I've been stressed for my personal safety and the safety of my staff and the safety of my students. And it sucks that that's just the world that we live in now. But that has been a big stressor. Like I definitely have tension headaches about all of that that's been going on. (Daniel)

It is not surprising that the global outbreak of COVID-19 generated stress for these participants, but in particular, the stress appears to lie in the significant disruption it has on the nature of their work, including the transition to and from remote work.

While participants highlighted some typical work stressors, such as frustration with management or role ambiguity, unique stressors emerged from these interviews that are more specific to this particular staff role. Participants are driven by a growth mindset that helps to them to foster growth in their students and themselves. However, their investment in students and their well-being is also a source of stress as the participants are faced with issues and challenges that can extend beyond the scope of their work or resources. While it was clear participants wanted to be accessible to their students and to be a safe resource, participants describe feeling stressed when they are unable to help their students, particularly when faced with significant crises. This has only been

exacerbated by the pandemic as well as greater national issues that impact their students. Feeling these impacts both directly and indirectly, these stressful experiences take a toll on the participants, ranging from feelings of nervousness and anxiety to headaches to feelings of exhaustion and a desire to leave their positions, making them important considerations in the improvement of their workplace experiences.

Discussion

Findings from this study reflect some of the existing work stress research in higher education as well as presents new and unique experiences. Highlighting the value in utilizing qualitative methodology to explore work stress, interviews with the participants reveal dynamic experiences with stress in the workplace, supporting the transactional model for stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1985), exemplified by students serving as sources for both motivation and stress for the participants. When considering their stressors, the impact is profound as these student-supervisors are faced with secondary trauma from their students heightened by the pandemic and other socio-historical issues. Combined with a reported high workload, it becomes evident that these staff are particularly vulnerable to chronic stress, with some reporting symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue.

Participants cited a growth mindset approach to their work which acts as a powerful motivator. Having a growth mindset is valuable in higher education settings because it encourages students "to see themselves as 'works in progress' and to share their learning from successes and failures with each other. . . openly" (Clark & Sousa, 2018, p. 28). One view of growth mindset is that criticism is an opportunity to learn and grow (Clark & Sousa, 2018) and this is clearly demonstrated by some participants

providing their students regular and constructive feedback. By approaching their work with this mindset, they can create a growth mindset culture in their respective tour programs, one that is open to challenges and removes the fear of failure (Clark & Sousa, 2018). From a retention standpoint, there is evidence that growth mindsets can lead to greater well-being and job satisfaction (Crum et al., 2013), demonstrating the value that this mindset can have when facing stressful situations.

Also evident in the participants' motivators were a desire to not only support and be a resource for their student staff, but to support prospective students in their higher education journey. This can be seen to represent what Stanton-Salazar (2011) describes as an *institutional agent*, someone who "acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources" (p. 1067). Institutional agents, such as these participants, act as powerful mediators for students who may experience decreased levels of access to educational and occupational opportunities due to their socioeconomic or minority-status background (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Because the participants work in, or closely with, admission at their respective universities, they have an opportunity to provide valuable social support in the form of university and application resources, in addition to campus visits. Overall, all the participants emphasized the belief that their roles as institutional agents have an impact on others and provides meaning in their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), which serves as a powerful motivator to do the work that they do.

The themes that emerged from this study demonstrate the value of applying the transactional framework for work stress in qualitative research. Using the conceptual framework of stress developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1985; Lazarus & Folkman,

1984). Within this definition, stress is seen as dynamic and multi-dimensional which is reflected in the participants' experiences with work stress. Encounters or situations at work that are seen as stressful can also be viewed as motivating under different circumstances or at a different time (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). This dichotomy is highlighted by the participants' description of stress surrounding supporting students. While they are now faced with student concerns and challenges that they may feel unable to help resolve, under more typical circumstances they are motivated by the opportunity to help the students solve problems. This is highlighted by a participant who stated, "that's a piece that I like about my job... working with people and helping people solve problems", but also stated that currently amidst the pandemic and social unrest, "it stresses me out... just worrying about how they're doing and are we doing everything we can to support them in whatever way that they need." Supporting the transactional model, the environment and greater context influences the perceptions of stress and motivation.

According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) definition of work stress, event uncertainty can impact and heighten perceptions of stress. All the participants cited a general predictability of stressful events in their roles, or a cyclical nature to the job. In the case where stress is more predictable, individuals may be better able to determine appropriate coping strategies and apply them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This is supported by Mark and Smith's (2018) study of university faculty in which *unexpected* tasks or disrupted plans were considered stressful. The current pandemic context has generated significant uncertainty for the participants and has disrupted the typical pattern of predictability. Earlier participants felt a strong sense of uncertainty around the end of the pandemic and return to campus, whereas the latter participants felt uncertainty during

the transition back to campus and in-person operations, akin to role ambiguity (Katz & Kahn, 1978). There is evidence that the duration of stressful events can increase the perceived stress by an individual and their ability to cope effectively. This can ultimately lead to exhaustion (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which was explicitly described by some of the participants.

Half of the participants described feeling a lack of motivation and a strong sense of "tiredness" in their roles. The pandemic increased the workload for many of the participants, with some reporting that their most recent six months were the most stressful in their careers. For one participant, the increased and sustained workload throughout the pandemic left him unable to fulfill his obligations as a graduate student and he had to sacrifice socializing opportunities. In this instance, his primary form of coping through social support was inaccessible to him, exacerbating the impacts. The resulting stress was significant enough to cause him to seriously consider leaving his position. Another participant described not wanting to get up in the mornings and go to work, experiencing a feeling of dread when looking at his work calendar.

Compounded with the support these staff provide students, these feelings of exhaustion and fatigue can be described as burnout (Freudenberger, 1974). As Maslach et al. (2001) found, one of the leading causes of burnout is intense involvement with others, as is the case with these participants in the ways that they support their student staff through crises. Furthermore, those who are experiencing burnout are more susceptible to secondary traumatic stress and its impacts, including the development of compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002; DuBois & Mistretta, 2020). Compassion fatigue can ultimately lead to poor work performance, low morale, apathy, absenteeism, and attrition (Figley,

2002). While these experiences have been explored within student affairs roles, these participants describe similar experiences with students despite serving in a supervisory role. It is therefore important to consider the toll of these stressors on the participants and to acknowledge the potential for chronic stress, specifically in the context of a global pandemic. The vulnerability to both burnout and compassion fatigue are concerning for not only the staff member, but for the students they support.

Overall, this qualitative approach to work stress in university settings revealed some similarities to past research, as well as some new and valuable nuances. Identified stressors align with some of the most prominent stressors in work stress research in university settings such as lack of resources, task overload, and poor leadership (Ablanedo-Rosas et al., 2011; Gillespie et al., 2001; Liu et al., 2008; Narayanan et al., 1999; Tytherleigh et al., 2005; Winefield et al., 2003). However, when focusing on student-supervising university staff, compared to other staff or academic faculty, greater nuances emerge such as the role of working with students as both a motivating and stressful aspect of the job, as well as unique challenges currently being faced as they work through a global pandemic.

Limitations & implications for future research

The current study presents some limitations, including the small sample size which limits generalizability. A second limitation of this study is the unique context of these interviews during a global pandemic. The nature of the participants' work has dramatically shifted as a result, which may impact their perceptions of stress in the workplace. Stressors during this time may be more novel and less common under normal working conditions, though no less important. Additionally, the participants were

interviewed at two distinct points in time, with some participants working remotely at the time of the interview, while others had transitioned back to campus and in-person operations. In some ways, this is a strength of the study in capturing stressful work experiences for these professionals across two phases of the pandemic. However, pandemic stressors for the two groups were slightly different, with the earlier group stressed about working from home conditions and uncertainty of the timeline for a return to in-person work. For the second group, there was significant stress surrounding the return in-person and a perceived lack of support, as well as stronger feelings of burnout and exhaustion in comparison to the first group. Future research could focus on one temporal context for participants, or conduct multiple interviews with participants over time to more precisely map changing stress experiences. Further research on the impacts of the pandemic on professional staff, particularly those who work closely with students, is needed.

The findings from this study could serve as a source for the establishment of a survey to expand the exploration of work stress among student-supervising staff. Operationalizing common stressors found among these participants, a survey could be used to explore the relationships between these stressors and work outcomes such as stress, dissatisfaction, burnout, or intention to leave. Additionally, staff who may supervise students outside of visitor services could be included to expand the range of roles considered.

Providing support to students was found to be a primary motivator for these staff, while an inability to support students was a source of stress. In consideration of future research, the value that participants ascribe to their positions as institutional agents

(Stanton-Salazar, 2011) could provide a compelling lens to further explore how visitor services and admission staff perceive their roles and how their own values and identities contribute to their work experiences and the importance of their roles on campus as they serve more underrepresented and first-generation students.

Additionally, literature on burnout and secondary student trauma in higher education tends to focus primarily on student affairs positions. While some of the participants' roles are classified as student affairs at their respective university, there are considerable differences between the nature of the work of these student supervisors versus a more traditional student support role. Expanding the research on burnout and secondary trauma outside of student affairs positions would improve our understanding of the impact that working with students in a variety of capacities has on professional staff and the risk it poses to both the staff and the students they work with.

Implications for practice

The value of staff having a growth mindset approach to their work, as well as encouraging that within students, can be seen in how the participants approach and respond to stressful experiences. Universities and individual departments would be well-served to promote a growth culture among their employees to better encourage professional development, the embracing of challenges, and remove fear of mistakes or failure. However, it is important to consider the ways in which the current managerial nature of higher education (Gildersleeve et al., 2010; Szekeres, 2004) does not support this sort of approach. Working within an institution focused on productivity, often with decreasing resources, may not be conducive to building a growth culture on a larger, more sustainable scale.

By approaching challenging situations as learning opportunities, staff may be better prepared to approach their work positively and experience a greater connection to the university. Looking at ways growth mindset can be facilitated at a more individual level, managers should also encourage this growth mindset in their staff by providing regular constructive feedback and tangible goals to promote staff development. Staff who work with students can also encourage this growth mindset among students, which will promote valuable skillsets to help them navigate their lives post-graduation. Considering that these participants were motivated to pursue this work because of their student experiences, instilling a growth culture with student employees can be a beneficial tool in encouraging students to pursue this field and further that culture in higher education.

From this study we can also see that those who work directly with student employees face unique stressors compared to professional staff who do not work directly with students in the same way. As highlighted by some of the participants, the trainings and resources that are most utilized by these staff are those that directly relate to supervising students. With so many university staff responsible for supervising students across campus in a variety of roles, the university should aim to provide comprehensive training to better help staff respond to the unique work challenges that may arise, such as student crises, conflict management, and how to effectively coach students. Fundamentally, one stressor appeared to be that leadership and administration might not fully acknowledge the labor professional staff undertake with students. Therefore, mitigating work stress will not only require providing resources, but university administrators must acknowledge and support the notion that supervising students is

central to how staff remain motivated in the workplace when they are given the proper support and resources to do so.

Specifically, in the pandemic context, this study reveals some key areas that managers should focus on in regard to supporting their professional staff. When it comes to remote work, participants articulated a need for reliable support from their supervisors, including clear expectations. Additionally, the flexibility that working from home provided employees is something to be considered under normal, in-person operations. Having a more flexible schedule appeared to help employees de-stress and may promote more productivity. More recently, the return to campus operations and in-person work was a significant stressor for staff. A lack of support, unclear expectations, and a lack of communication presented a significant challenge for these staff and as one participant stated, it "soured" his perspective in his current role. Acknowledging the concerns that staff have regarding their own safety and well-being, while recognizing the responsibility that comes with leading a team of students through this sort of transition are critical in ensuring that staff are able to safely return to campus and continue to have a positive working experience. As seen in this study, a failure to do so can lead to a lack of motivation, burnout, and intentions to leave.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore how student-supervising, university staff perceive their experiences with work stress. Through interviews with six staff at separate California universities who supervise a staff of student tour guides, some common themes emerged around motivation and work stress including the value of a growth mindset, the dual nature of supporting students as both a motivator and stressor,

and the unique stressors that have developed as a result of the global pandemic. While some of the stressors aligned with past research in the university setting, such as lack of resources and unclear expectations, greater nuance was discovered in how these staff navigate work stress. Given the pivotal role these staff fulfill on campus in providing students with college access, employment, and professional growth opportunities, their experiences can help inform individual leaders and universities at large how to better recruit and retain qualified and successful student-supervising staff.

Endnote

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CHAPTER THREE

Voices of Professional Staff: Exploring the Student-Staff Relationship in Higher Education and Characterizing Exemplary University Staff

Introduction

What can be seen from the literature on student success is that educational actors or institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; 2011) can play a pivotal role in the experiences of students, particularly low-income and first-generation students (Bassett, 2021), as well as students of color (Luedke, 2017; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Looking at the impact of relationships with institutional agents such as a faculty or professional staff on college students' experiences, it can be seen that their relationships with students can positively impact their academic success (Hanson et al., 2016; Means & Pyne, 2017) and even encourage students to pursue graduate education (Hanson et al., 2016; Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019; Trolian & Parker, 2017). Along with academic support, positive interactions with faculty, peers, and administrators can support students in their social endeavors at the university (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). These observations are consistent with a social networks perspective that maintains that "college students' relationships with faculty, staff, and peers contribute to student satisfaction and persistence," as well as enhancing students' sense of belonging (Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019, p. 376). While these key institutional actors can include faculty, administrators, peers, and professional staff, the latter group is noticeably absent in the research on college student success, with little research exploring student-staff relationships specifically (Bensimon, 2007; Luedke, 2017) despite professional staff making up the majority of employees at most college campuses (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). This gap has been criticized given the

breadth of services that professional staff provide and their institutional knowledge (Bensimon, 2007; Graham, 2012; Graham, 2013; Graham & Regan, 2016; Roberts, 2018).

Recognizing that positive interactions with staff are important for college students, there is evidence that relationships with students are equally important for professional staff. In a study of university professionals who supervise student employees, it can be seen that relationships with students, while complex, are an integral aspect of the job (*see Chapter 2*). Participants cited working with students and forming positive relationships with them as a key motivator in their professional lives, in addition to an investment in the professional and personal growth of students. However, interactions with students were also a primary source of work stress, particularly in situations where the participants felt they did not have the resources or ability to properly help the student navigate challenges that arose (Reimel, 2020). Students brought forward personal and serious issues they were facing to the staff participants, demonstrating a level of vulnerability and trust in their relationships, and the perception that these professional staff members were in a position to support them.

Taking this into consideration, we can see the potential value in positive, trusting relationships between professional staff and students. Yet, we know relatively little about the staff-student relationship in higher education as the research on student success primarily focuses on students' relationships to faculty and teaching staff. The present study aims to address that gap and explore the perspectives of university professional staff regarding their relationships with, and impact on, students. Study participants include professional staff at a single university in administrative and other support roles

who have been recognized for their exemplary support of students to identify what qualities and behaviors support positive relationships with students, as well as any institutional barriers that inhibit the formation of those relationships.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of this study is to expand the inclusion of professional staff in the literature and better understand what a supportive staff member looks like in action by identifying the key traits among professional staff that positively support students, as well as any institutional barriers that may limit their capability. Following an exploratory approach, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What role do professional staff perceive they play in the college student experience?
2. What are the key qualities and behaviors of supportive professional staff?
3. In what ways, if any, do staff act as *empowerment* agents?
4. Do professional staff identify any organizational or institutional barriers that inhibit their ability to support students?

Utilizing Stanton-Salazar's (2011) framework for institutional and empowerment agents for professional university staff, this study aims to shed light on the role that professional staff play in the college student experience. The first three questions will serve to uncover how staff perceive their own role with students and what sorts of behaviors or qualities help them to serve students in their fullest capacity, including student empowerment. From an organizational standpoint, the final question serves to elicit any workplace barriers that prevent staff from being able to support students to their fullest capacity or in the way that they desire. These research questions allow this study

to highlight characteristics or behaviors that staff identify as beneficial in supporting students, as well as institutional impediments that may be negatively impacting the formation of positive, supportive relationships between students and professional staff. In doing so, this study takes a step toward advancing the necessary, but lacking, inclusion of professional staff in the literature as individuals with the potential to positively impact college students through their socialization.

Literature review

Contextualizing professional staff in higher education

Universities across the United States are expanding and increasing the numbers of employed professional staff (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014; Frye & Fulton, 2020). In just the past few decades, the hiring of professional staff has outpaced that of faculty and in 2016, professional staff outnumbered full-time faculty at higher education institutions in the United States (Frye & Fulton, 2020). Despite their growing representation on university campuses, research on university staff and their role in the support of college students remains largely undeveloped (Bossu & Brown, 2018; Graham, 2010; Szekeres, 2004). Even with growing emphasis on student satisfaction, success, and retention, the role and impact of professional staff has been largely overlooked (Graham & Regan, 2016).

Substantial research exists on the relationships students form with faculty and the impact of those relationships, including a sense of belonging on campus, academic success, and persistence (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton et al., 2000; Tinto, 1993). However, there is evidence that within higher education, and particularly among research universities, faculty are allocating more of their time to research and less time to

student advising (Milem et al., 2000). In this context, staff are key to university operations and contribute to a larger number of services on campus compared to faculty (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018; Graham, 2012; Luedke, 2017). Staff may be socialized into their institutions more deeply and have greater funds of institutional knowledge within the university compared to faculty given the formal and informal ways they learn and observe institutional practices (Bensimon, 2007). Further, the very nature of student-staff relationships appears distinct from student-faculty relationships given that staff are not directly responsible for the grades of students, potentially allowing for a greater level of vulnerability (Luedke, 2017). For these reasons it is important that we expand our understanding of the role that university staff play in college students' experiences, including the ways in which they provide support to students given their "systemic knowledge" and "intellectual capital" (Graham, 2012, p. 439).

Supportive student-staff relationships: Impact & key factors

Research that includes or focuses on university staff demonstrates how positive interactions between staff and students can support students socially, personally, and academically (Bassett, 2021; Dowd et al., 2013; Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Means & Pyne, 2017; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Students may feel encouraged by staff to participate in campus organizations, internships, and scholarship programs and can be connected to supportive peer groups (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). The support that students receive may help to build confidence and counter negative stereotypes, motivating them to become advocates for both themselves and their peers on campus (Dowd et al., 2013; Means & Pyne, 2017). Additionally, staff can play a pivotal role in providing academic information and support and helping students along their educational

pathway (Bassett, 2021; Dowd et al., 2013; McCallen & Johnson, 2020). These individuals do so by building trusting relationships, going above and beyond their assigned duties to be available for students when needed, and in some cases, sharing a common identity with the students they support (Dowd et al., 2013; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Museus & Neville, 2012). Importantly, staff can use their campus networks to connect students to critical resources, as well as connect staff to one another and build better campus partnerships (Museus & Neville, 2012; Roberts, 2018).

When looking at supportive staff members, common qualities or behaviors emerge from the literature, including making themselves available to provide holistic support and going above and beyond their role expectations, both of which stem from a genuine care and concern for students (Luedke, 2017; Museus & Neville, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Roberts, 2018; Schreiner at al., 2011). As part of their support of students, staff were found to be honest, yet encouraging, and to create secure and safe spaces for students (Dowd et al., 2013; Luedke, 2017; Museus & Neville, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). For students from marginalized communities, having a staff member who acknowledged their background or shared a similar identity helped them to feel cared for and contributed positively to their experience (Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Staff were also seen to go beyond just supporting students, but *empowering* them by setting high expectations, challenging internalized negative stereotypes and encouraging them to pursue greater opportunities (Dowd et al., 2013; Means & Pyne, 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2013). For those who assumed higher-

status roles at their institution, they utilized their positions to advocate for students, create opportunities, and educate and empower other campus staff (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018).

Theoretical framework

Understanding the increasing numbers of professional staff in higher education (Bossu & Brown, 2018; Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014) and the unique nature of student-staff relationships (Luedke, 2017) this study aims to explore student-staff relationships through a social capital lens. Many theories related to inequities in higher education success are rooted in Bourdieu's (1973) theory of social reproduction. One of the key concepts of this theoretical framework is cultural capital, which may include "informal interpersonal skills, habits, manners, linguistics, educational credentials, and lifestyle preferences" (Berger, 2000, p. 97). While cultural capital is a symbolic resource, it can be used by individuals to increase their status in society and further accumulate more capital (Berger, 2000). In the educational context, schools place greater value on certain forms of cultural capital, often those already valued in the greater societal context, thereby (re)producing and legitimizing social structures and inequities (Bourdieu, 1973). Through this lens, disparate access to valued forms of capital can be viewed as a mechanism by which those with lesser access can be further marginalized (Bourdieu, 1973), and an asset-based approach that values students' background capital can "enhance students' opportunities for success throughout college and their upward social mobility beyond college" (Luedke, 2017, p. 50).

Recognizing the unique and critical forms of support to which university professional staff have access, this study positions professional staff as those with the capacity to act as both *institutional* and *empowerment agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Building on the concept of social capital, *institutional agents* are "high-status, non-kin, agents who occupy relatively high positions" and "who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1066). An individual with the capacity to act as an institutional agent does so when they "act to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources" (Stanton-Salazar 2011, p. 1067). These resources fall into two major categories, either being positional, in which they are linked to the particular position that individual fulfills, or personal, in which they are linked to the individual themselves regardless of their role.

These individuals with access to these forms of social capital can often work unintentionally as *gate-keeping agents* who provide institutional support to those who are privileged, whether through class or race, and already have access to the capital that is valued by the institution (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Following a Bordieuan theory of social reproduction, these individuals would contribute to the reproduction of inequality, regardless of intent. However, these individuals can "go counter to the established social structure, and to 'alter the destinies' of those located on the lower rungs of hierarchy who typically are not allocated the institution's high-status resources and rewards" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1086). Moving beyond just providing resources to help students succeed in education, institutional agents have the capacity to act as *empowerment agents*, in which they "not only fulfill a commitment to provide key resources to disenfranchised youth within their reach, they also engage them in collaborative networking to *change the world*" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1093). This requires the individual to go against the norms of their institution and work alongside the student. This is no easy task when

higher education as an institution historically has served as a site of reproduction for class and racial inequality.

Within this framework, university professional staff are well-situated to act as both *institutional* and *empowerment agents* on behalf of students. Professional staff fulfill a wide variety of roles on campus, each having its own positional access to important institutional resources. Applying this model, some roles may lend themselves to one form of support more than others. Individuals with more experience and institutional knowledge may be able to connect students to a broader network and refer them to other key agents as needed. This model encourages them to go beyond providing the resources and work to dismantle the systems that prevent students from oppressed communities having equal access to these resources or knowledge in the first place. Through this framework, this study aims to examine the ways in which exemplary university staff provide access to social capital at their institution and value existing capital in an assets-based approach. Additionally, key traits of supportive staff will be identified to determine what sorts of qualities or behaviors are utilized by professional staff to best support the students they interact with on college campuses.

Context of the study

This study takes place within one public research university in California. As a Tier 1 research university, faculty are expected to produce novel research in addition to the education of students. On one hand, this provides students with the opportunity to engage with faculty in the research process. On the other, it means that faculty have dual commitments, and may be required to prioritize research, resulting in less time to dedicate to connecting with students outside of the classroom. Students may therefore

seek support from staff on campus more frequently. As a large university with approximately 23,000 undergraduate students, the university employs over 3,300 full-time, non-academic employees (excluding student staff) compared to approximately 1,200 full-time faculty staff. Designated as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), the university is classified as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) with 28% of undergraduates identifying as Chicano/Latino and 30% identify as American Indian/Native American or Asian/Pacific Islander.

This study was conducted between September 2021 and March 2022. During this time, the university had since resumed in-person instruction and most in-person activities after being remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For many students, this was their first quarter on the university campus even if they were not a first-year student. This context is crucial in understanding the atypical nature of the staff participants' experiences compared to pre-pandemic years. While some staff had returned to in-person work operations on campus by the time of this study (or may have never stopped working in-person), many staff were still working remotely or in a hybrid format.

Methodology

Through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 13 university staff who have been recognized as exemplary in their support of students, the present study explores how these staff members describe their own relationships with students and what characteristics help them to best serve students. Following a constructivist tradition, interviews allow the participants to identify and describe their own subjective experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which is important in amplifying the voices of

professional staff and acknowledging their unique role in promoting student success. Interview data were analyzed using a consensual qualitative research approach (Hill et al., 1997) to identify key findings among participants.

Participants

With the purpose of better understanding the experiences and key characteristics of professional university staff who positively support students, participants were selected from a pool of campus-wide award nominees who have been recognized for their exemplary service to students within the university. Annual nominees for this award are deemed by both students and other university actors as going above and beyond their job duties, as those who "demonstrate … an extraordinary commitment to the overall growth and development of students; who consistently strive for excellence in their support of students; and who have a commitment to the improvement of the quality of student life" (system documentation). By soliciting professional staff from this pool of nominees, they can be considered to act on their role as *institutional agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and have formed positive relationships with students, positioning them well to discuss their experiences with college students and what factors contribute to their ability to support them.

Study criteria were established to narrow and refine the participant pool to those who can best speak to positive student-staff relationships and are most familiar with the topic (Hill et al., 1997; Preissle & LeCompte, 1984). Each year, 25-30 campus staff and faculty are nominated for this award, however, only staff who work in a non-academic position (e.g., housing, recreation or athletics, and support services staff) were invited. One participant who is classified as academic staff was included given that their role

aligns with program management and student employment supervision rather than teaching. In total, 18 participants from the previous three years were invited provided they still maintained employment by the university. Of the participants, only one was no longer serving in the same role as they had been when they were nominated for the award.

Eligible staff were invited to participate via email and of the 18 total invitations, 13 staff (8 women, 5 men) agreed to participate as outlined in Table 1 below. The length of time in their current role ranged from 1-28 years (average of 9.2 years) and the length of time they have been at the university ranged from 5-32 years (average 14.2). In total, participants represented a combined 185 years of university service, demonstrating the depth of institutional knowledge and experience possessed by this group. Six participants identified as White, five as Asian, one as Latina, and one as Native American (Table 1).

Study participants fulfilled a variety of roles across campus, including housing, career services, health services, recreation, financial services, and higher-level administration roles. Seven professional staff were in manager or director roles (Table 1). Three participants requested that their roles not be identified. As noted earlier, the university is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI), and several study participants worked in units that dealt directly with these missions or with the university's commitment to diversity. For example, Julie works closely with first-generation college students and other programs to support the retention of underrepresented minority students. Jenna is the director of a scholarship program for income-eligible students who are primarily from underrepresented minority groups to support their academic success.

Role of the researcher

Within qualitative research it is important that researchers record and monitor any biases in an effort to "identify how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of the data" (Merriam, 2002, p. 5; Hill et al., 1997). In the context of this study, it is important that I outline my professional biases to maintain transparency with the reader and acknowledge the ways in which my understanding and interpretation of this data cannot be separated from my own experiences (Hill et al., 1997). My perspective and understanding of the staff experience inevitably influence this work and it is this connection that brought me to this research. In addition to my position as a graduate student and researcher, I am employed by the university and have worked as a professional staff member for over seven years. As a result, I am deeply connected to this particular university and have established relationships with both students and professional staff. While I did not have prior relationships with the majority of study participants, my professional experience assisted me in building rapport and having an established understanding of various references the participants made in reference to their work within the university.

While my role may have assisted in building rapport and a sense of trust with the participants, it is equally important to consider the ways in which my professional capacity may have made some participants hesitant to be critical of the university (or other staff) or share candidly about their experiences. In many cases, participants often clarified when they wanted certain information to not be connected to them or their position in the final study, and in some cases, interview recordings were paused while staff shared certain stories or comments that may have felt compromising. In this way, it

Table 1
Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Job Title	# of years in role	# of years at institution	Self-reported ethnicity	Gender identity
Tara	Manager, Housing Services	6	10	Asian	Woman
Ronald	Emergency Manager	12	15	White	Man
Laura	Director of Academic Programs	8	8	Asian	Woman
Mary	Asst. Director, Recreation	28	30	White	Woman
Julie	Director	5	5	Asian	Woman
Jenna	Scholarship Director	5	10	American Indian & White	Woman
Lydia	Confidential	3	32	Mexican American	Woman
Simon	Chief of Staff	1	14	White	Man
Thomas	Assistant Director	5	5	Asian & White	Man
David	Career Counselor	5	5	White	Man
Susan	Confidential	11	17	White	Woman
Cassandra	Confidential	6	6	White	Woman
Greg	Health Educator	25	28	Asian	Man

was integral that I maintained confidentiality and respected the participants concerns about anonymity to present study findings accurately and honestly, even when critical of the institution in which they work.

Data collection

As described above, participants were selected based on their nomination for a campus award in recognition of their support of students to best identify key factors of supportive student-staff relationships and elicit their experiences in the university setting. Nominees from the prior three years who fulfilled non-academic roles and were still

employed by the university were invited via email by the researcher. Upon agreement of their participation and completion of the provided consent form, study participants were sent a pre-interview questionnaire to collect employment and demographic information (Appendix B). In total, 13 participants agreed to participate and completed both the online questionnaire and interview.

Interviews were then arranged based on their availability, with most taking place during working hours and lasting typically between 30-60 minutes. After initial warm up questions (Hill et al., 1997; Patton, 1990), professional staff were asked about their work with students, including how it fulfills them professionally, what factors they perceive help to build those positive student-staff relationships, and the ways in which they support and empower students. Participants were also asked about perceived institutional barriers in their support of students (*e.g., Are there ways in which you are not able to assist students in your full capacity? If so, are there any institutional resources or changes that could be made that would improve your ability to support students?).* The full interview guide can be found in Appendix C. All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom to protect the safety of both the staff and the researcher in light of COVID-19. Upon completion of both the questionnaire and interview, participants were compensated with an e-gift card. Interview recordings were then transcribed either by the researcher or using transcription software. All identifying information was omitted and names replaced with a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Data analysis

Interview data were reviewed and analyzed by a research team which included the researcher and two undergraduate students [1]. Following Hill et al.'s (1997)

recommendations for consensual qualitative research, utilizing a research team allows for a variety of perspectives, reduces the influence of individual bias, and encourages a more complex investigation of the data. The research team met initially to identify and agree upon the primary domains of the study (Hill et al., 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) which included the following in line with the interview protocol: context of student interaction, fulfillment and motivation, qualities of supportive staff, supportive behaviors and experiences, and institutional limitations. Each researcher then reviewed the transcripts independently to break the transcript data into the various domains and then code for specific concepts. The team then met and discussed these concepts until consensus was reached. At that point, these ideas were analyzed across cases to find similarities and dissimilarities among participants and group concepts into larger categories (Hill et al., 1997). Taking place over the span of two and a half months, this analytic process allowed the research team to dive deeply into the interview data, discuss ideas and any disagreements in the categorization of data, and clearly outline the most prominent findings which are detailed in the next section in relation to staff professional fulfillment and motivation, qualities and behaviors of supportive staff, empowerment of students, and institutional limitations.

Findings

Interviews with study participants revealed common themes within their professional motivations and the characteristics that enable them to successfully support students, including a desire to connect with students both during their time at the university and afterward. To better establish those relationships, staff described making themselves available to listen to what students need, including proactively identifying

existing gaps in student support. Staff described using their institutional networks to connect students to resources and opportunities, as well as advocating on behalf of students. Yet, we also see that staff can go beyond advocating on behalf of students and empower students to advocate for themselves. Finally, limitations and barriers within the institution itself were identified, which hinder the participants' ability to support students to their fullest capacity including a lack of intercampus communication and collaboration, budgetary and staffing shortcomings, and navigating institutional policy and bureaucracy.

Professional fulfillment and motivation

When asked about their source of fulfillment in their professional work, it was clear that these staff members are driven by their work with students. Thomas, who works in student life, remarked, "working with students definitely does fill the cup, which is why I've stayed in this field." Many participants alluded to their work and relationships with students being the primary impetus in their career, outweighing negative work factors such as low pay, unusual working hours, or a stressful working environment. Lydia, who has worked at the university for over 30 years, described her work as "a labor of love," but one that she takes seriously.

Beyond a desire to serve students, many staff described how fulfilling it was for them to build longer-term relationships with students, extending even post-graduation. Being able to see students grow over their time at the university was important for many participants, but what was particularly fulfilling was when the students were able to succeed after graduation and beyond, as shared by Simon who has spent 14 years working at the university:

> Seeing students that I worked with five or ten years ago, and incidentally interacting with them and finding out that they've gotten married, they got a dream job, they had a kid, that they work in education now, whatever it is. Those sorts of long-distance things, knowing that I was a small part . . . of their development and experience was really encouraging.

Whether staff described staying connected with students via email or social media or meeting up with them periodically, staff like Susan feel "that's super rewarding to know where they started and how they're living their lives now." Some commented on how they use messages or mementos from students they have connected with previously as sources of motivation in times where it is needed to remind themselves of the impact that they have in a student's life and success.

For some participants, their sense of professional fulfillment is more personal. Leaning on their own experiences or identity, some staff felt that it was important they give back to students the support that they themselves were provided, such as Lydia who was a first-generation college student herself.

> I chose this profession because I wanted to serve students. You know, being a first-generation student, [there] was so many questions that I had that I couldn't get answered at home. There was just no base of knowledge for me in terms of knowing what this environment required, adjusting to the rigor, just feeling a sense of place for myself, a sense of belonging . . . and I had mentors who really filled that gap for me and stepped up.

In this way, staff described a desire to pay it forward, recognizing that their support of students may carry beyond that direct interaction, such as Thomas who values his work

with student leaders and believes in the “trickle-down effect” it may have on the student community at large. Laura, who herself pursued a PhD in a male-dominated field and relied on her mentors stated:

> I'm standing on the shoulders of all the other people that have supported me. Without their knowledge and their experiences, I would not be able to do what I do. I'm hoping that he uses my support to be able to support others as well in the future.

While the immediate impacts of their support of students were important for these staff members, among this group there was also an appreciation of the ways their support could extend further beyond campus boundaries.

Qualities and behaviors of supportive staff

Making themselves available

By interviewing professional staff who are considered to be exemplary in their support of students, common behaviors or characteristics were found that enable staff to be successful in this regard. First and foremost, participants described how they make themselves available to students and create opportunities to not only build relationships with students, but listen to their needs. Mary, who supervises a team of students at the university’s recreation facility shared her approach to student communication.

> I feel that I have an open-door policy basically with the students. That they can come in anytime and whatever they need, whether it's work or whether it's school or whether it's personal, that that's part of what we do here to support them. I feel that openness and that willingness to support them in whatever they're struggling

with, life or work or school, I think builds a better bridge, despite the age gap. And despite the fact that I'm their boss, officially.

Staff also expressed how important it was that they were able to create spaces that were welcoming and safe for students, such as Greg who stated, “I really want to create a safe space that people can let it out and know that they're not going to be judged for that and know that I think that they're competent.” By creating these open and safe spaces, staff are able to give students the room they need to share freely and communicate their needs.

Whether through open “office hours” like Cassandra or sharing personal contact information like Thomas, staff wanted to make it known to students they were accessible whenever needed. However, many staff shared that they often work outside of typical working hours to help students in need. In some cases, this meant accompanying students to the emergency room, or in Tara’s case, driving to campus on a weekend to assist a student with a flat tire. Some participants even shared that they have given personal money to students to cover emergency expenses such as toiletries or housing. However, even when talking about these situations, staff did not consider this to be above and beyond, but rather the nature of their work.

Actively identifying student needs

In addition to creating space and making themselves available for students to share their needs, some staff went a step further and described how they actively aim to identify areas where students may need support. David, a career counselor, described his counseling approach as centered around “looking for gaps in where the academic curriculum [is] not preparing them.” Both Lydia and Simon, who serve in more senior administrative roles, shared this was the nature of university work and that it was critical

for staff to be proactive. In Simon's own words, "you just kind of have to be adaptable and look for gaps in service to students and say, *that's a gap that I'm going to fill*". This included an awareness of their own strengths and skillsets and an understanding of how to best utilize them to address student needs. Cassandra described this as her "arsenal of tools" that she uses to help and support students with a wide variety of issues that may come about. This initiative in supporting students, rather than waiting for issues to be brought forward (often by students themselves), may be a distinguishing factor in staff providing exemplary support.

Leveraging their institutional network

One of the most frequently reported behaviors among staff participants was the utilization of their professional connections to support students and refer them out as needed. For example, many staff described having to physically walk students to other offices or staff members to connect the student with the appropriate department or person for their respective need. Jenna, who oversees a scholarship program for income-eligible (e.g., low-income) students described how intentional she is in connecting with individuals both on and off campus so that she can better serve the students she works with.

> We're very, very well-connected on campus, so. . . we have a connection in just about every office on campus, including faculty, amongst a ton of different departments. So, there's very little that can happen that we can't help with.

Julie, who works primarily with first-generation students, was able to take advantage of her campus connections to assist a student in crisis and at risk of dropping out. Through those connections she was able to help the student secure stable housing and get

connected with an academic advisor who could work with them more effectively given the student's unique experiences. Having these important connections enables these staff to better address student challenges that may arise that extend beyond the staff member's scope or immediate resources. One participant described working with students and parents as an "onion" where "you start to peel back other issues in their lives. And maybe you connect them. . . with those resources" (Ronald).

In addition to connecting students to other resources as needed, staff described leveraging their own professional experience and knowledge to support students in their professional pursuits. Many staff described how they often write letters of recommendation for students. David's role centers around these career discussions, and he shared he is "often suggesting we meet and talk about their future. I send them opportunities and try to write them some letters of rec and get stuff on their LinkedIn profile and help them move forward."

Their staff network was often shared as invaluable in this form of student development and support, as some staff were able to directly connect students to internship or career opportunities. Ronald lamented how challenging it can be for students to get full-time roles in emergency work given the difficulty in gaining relevant experience while a student. He and his staff are "networking and trying to work with students across the nation and trying to fill that void" and he stated how some of his former students are now successful in the field. Thomas shared a similar approach when working with students who are looking for employment in higher education, because "we [staff] know where people are hiring." This career development piece was important for many staff and allowed them to more fully support student success post-graduation.

Demonstrating empathy and honesty

When asked about what qualities they believed they possessed that made them so successful in their work with students, the most frequently reported trait was empathy.

> I am definitely a caring and empathetic person. I think that is an important piece of who I am and how I come into the work—is being open to seeing every interaction as an opportunity to build a relationship. An opportunity to get to know each other. For me to get to know the students, but for them to get to know me. (Julie)

> I think I'm very empathetic. So, there's times when I sort of have to be the bad cop, but at the same time, I am not blind. I'm not deaf to their struggles. And I think that's the biggest thing is knowing that, listen, if you need to talk to us as a boss or if you need to talk to me as an individual or as a mother or as a parent or as a professional, you can feel comfortable and it's confidential to do that. (Mary)

In some cases, staff felt that they were better able to be empathetic to students given their own life experiences and that their sense of empathy laid the foundation for a stronger, more supportive relationship with students.

Finally, staff demonstrated care for students by being honest, whether in their feedback to the student or about themselves. Laura felt that her honesty with students helped to build trust and credibility.

> I'm very honest with students and that's one thing that they always tell me that they've never experienced before. The honesty that I present to them is, I think, really critical for their growth. They always tell me that a lot of people just sugar

> coat things or that they're not as honest with them. They don't really feel like what they say really holds value.

Similarly, Thomas said that he does not shy away from providing students with feedback, even if it may be hard for the student to hear, in order to support their growth.

> You know that you messed up and now you're going to have a conversation with me. And I'm going to call you on the fact that you messed up. But it's not an attempt to shame you as it is an attempt to learn from this and do better next time.

Honesty also took the form of personal transparency, with some staff discussing how they present themselves authentically to students and are open about their own lives and experiences to varying extents. For Greg, this meant being open about his father's passing and how it allows him to support students through grief. For Susan, it means being authentic at work and serving as a model to the students she works with.

> They learn from me. There are days when I'm like, "man, this was a really hard day. It's hard for me to focus on what we're talking about right now." I think that's okay to say. I don't have to present like I'm just this perfect together person. But they get to see I'm a human being and how do I deal with that? How do I handle it? How do I work through issues, frustrations in the workplace when I feel like I'm not getting what I need from the university or whatever? Those are all just realities of the working world. And so, if we're just kind of pretending like everything's great and I have it all together, I'm not really helping them by doing that.

Empowerment of students

Building confidence and self-advocacy skills

Staff participants were asked the ways in which they empower students within their work and responses reveal the nuanced and impactful role that staff play in student empowerment. In many cases, empowerment came in the form of an improved sense of confidence, with staff "giving them tools and having them use it effectively so they can feel really good about themselves and their abilities" (Laura). For Cassandra, confidence-building is a core component of her advising work with students.

> I'll use what their language is and give it right back to them. They're like, "Yeah, I can do hard things." So, what other hard things have you been doing recently? Or what other hard things are you going to do this week? I'm empowering them using their words, being their cheerleader, giving them affirmations. And then we talk about strengths and facts versus the anxious depressive thoughts, like thinking about like, "Oh, I'm a failure. I can never do anything." Oh no, you just did *this*. So now how can we use this to empower you to do more?

Self-confidence was important, but confidence in other applicable life skills that extend beyond the university were also important, as demonstrated by Tara who shared, "I really want them to graduate with an amazing degree, but I also want them to graduate and be able to resolve a housing conflict or sign a lease successfully, or be a good friend, be a good listener."

As discussed earlier, some staff shared how they advocate on behalf of students. However, there were clear examples of staff instead empowering their students to advocate on their own behalf.

> I think it's about if you want to see a change in some *thing,* some organization, some institution, some department, keeping that to yourself is not going to yield

> any results. So how do we have a productive conversation with the people who need to hear that conversation? (Thomas)

Jenna described a situation where a racial slur was visibly displayed in a classroom in which one of her Black, female students attended. When the student brought this to her attention, Jenna immediately mobilized, but importantly, mobilized the student alongside her.

> I was like “No, we're not going to let that go. Let's figure out what we're going to do, but we're going to do something”. And so, we worked together. I got her in front of the dean of the college. We wrote an email. We just did a lot of things to kind of help her get her power back, you know. We do that all the time, just little things like that.
>
> We don't just let that stuff go by. And it's part of being becoming an adult, you know. Sticking up for yourself and realizing that you actually have a place here and that you sometimes have to fight for that place.

Reinforcing student power

In the previously described situation, we can see that these staff are intentional in reinforcing the power and autonomy that students have. In many cases, these came in the form of allowing students to make decisions for themselves, rather than being told by staff what they should do.

> I do think it is incredibly important that students recognize that they are in charge of their situation. I don't believe in doing everything for the student, because I do think we empower them by talking through tools by recognizing and reminding them of tools they already have . . . all of that is meant to empower them to make

> the decisions and the actions that they can make and do. I think there is a fine line between providing all of the knowledge and information that you can provide, but then letting them know that it is really then up to them to take the actions that they need to make and that they need to take in order to do what's right for them in the particular moment in time. (Julie)
>
> I step back, and I let them lead. I try not to tell people what they need or what they should be doing. It's more like, "I'm here, what do you need? How can I serve you? Here's what's available to you". Trying to empower groups versus telling them what to do. (Lydia)

For staff that supervise student employees, encouraging students to make decisions and be involved in the process was a key component of this empowerment. Susan, who supervises a team of peer mentors highlighted the need for students to make decisions regarding students, rather than staff.

> That's always been my priority, to have students running things. And from the beginning when I started the recovery program, the first thing I did was I found students. I hired students because I know I have an idea of what students might need, but I'm not a student. They need to be the ones calling the shots. They need to be the ones saying, "this is what we need." And then I'm the one that goes to the administration and fights for that and says, "This is what they need." And I really believe in that. When you're crafting a thing, something for students, students need to be the ones saying what they need. A bunch of old people can sit around a table and be like, "This is what we think students need." But if there aren't students at the table, we're going to miss it.

For Thomas, who works with leaders within Greek organizations, this empowerment permeates all of his conversations with students as they address various issues.

> How are we evaluating the circumstance and how are we claiming the power that we have in these cases when society has told us that we don't have power? And similar with our culturally based groups as well, like feeling very disenfranchised in an institution that was not built for them. How does coming together in comradery look? How do we elevate our voices?

Putting students in the driver's seat and helping them to reclaim their power is a clear example of the ways in which these professional staff can empower the students they work with to have an extended impact beyond the individual. This intentionality behind student empowerment may be a distinguishing factor between staff who simply support students when needed and those who go beyond to make an impactful and lasting change within the institution.

Institutional limitations

While it was evident from the interviews that the passion staff participants had for supporting and empowering students was not lacking, certain resources were. When asked about institutional limitations, many staff highlighted that the current staffing levels were not sufficient to meet the demand of their work, requiring staff to compromise on what they wanted to accomplish.

> Feeling understaffed, feeling under resourced, I think is a big component. There are things where I do not have time to do the additional follow-up with some of the students who really need it. Or I don't have time to do some outreach to guide individuals to different resources. (Thomas)

For some, the increased workload given insufficient staffing is made worse by low compensation, which was directly or indirectly mentioned by multiple participants. Budget was also brought up by participants in regard to limitations to their work and the support they can provide to students while navigating what one participant called "shoestring budgets" at the university.

A lack of intercampus communication and collaboration was also brought up by the participants. Jenna shared how she knows there are many great staff on campus, but "they're all in different places and they communicate through me, with me, but they don't necessarily communicate with each other." Some staff described working in "silos" often requiring students to be "ping ponged" across campus when seeking support. Some expressed frustration at the lack of collaboration and communication across departments and Simon related it to a "zero-sum perspective that can prevent us from thinking of ourselves as a team or fully acknowledging and leveraging how knowledgeable compassionate, committed, skillful people across the entire campus are."

Staff also described the challenges in working within the university itself and navigating bureaucracy and policy. Lydia, who has worked closely with the campus' undocumented student population shared some of the lowest moments of her career as a result of policies she felt were not ethical or moral.

> There were moments where policy was just so limiting and restricted, and the resources weren't there. And those moments were the darkest for me in terms of, we're admitting students, but we can't serve them . . . We need to create policies that are inclusive of humanity.

Policies and bureaucratic expectations that hinder staff's ability and flexibility to support students as needed can take a toll, with some participants describing feeling frustrated or even jaded over time. However, it is important to recognize the ways in which staff *have* found ways to navigate the institution to do the work that they need to do.

> I flipped the narrative for myself, so I could continue to be a possibility person. We'll be compliant. We'll follow the law. But we'll stretch in the direction that it allows, and we'll really enhance those opportunities. That's how we act on our values. We find a way and we try to be the moral leaders that we're here to be. What's the right thing to do? Go in that direction. (Lydia)

As aptly put by one participant, "I think we get some pretty amazing things done for [this university] in spite of [this university]."

Discussion

As revealed in this study, the relationships with and support of students is a critical component of the work that professional staff undertake in higher education. The ability to connect with students, develop relationships over time, and help students navigate through challenges was a key source of motivation and fulfillment for these staff members. Examples of staff utilizing their personal and/or positional resources were shared, such as staff connecting students with job opportunities or directly with important services or resources. All of the participants described ways in which they connected students with campus resources, other staff, or even involvement opportunities, highlighting the ways in which professional staff are well-positioned to assume the role of institutional agents and provide key forms of support (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Staff utilized their potential as *networking coaches* when they shared with students "knowledge of how to negotiate with, and access resources from, various gatekeepers and agents within and outside of the school environment (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1099), such as the case with Jenna who helped a student effectively communicate with university deans and administration to advocate for herself in light of a racial incident in her classroom. More generally, staff described helping students build and strengthen their coping strategies, including how to address and solve problems on their own (Stanton-Salazar 1997; 2011; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). However, clear examples of staff moving beyond providing institutional support and instead assuming the role of *empowerment agent* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) were seen.

In the context of this framework, empowerment is considered fundamental to social justice (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999) and involves empowering the individual student to "mobilize to access the resources and to exercise power so as to self-determine their very destiny" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1091). To do so requires a critical consciousness and a "socialization agenda aimed at transforming the consciousness of those they support, and at encouraging them to also become moral and caring agents devoted to *changing the world*" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1090; Ward, 2008). This includes helping students to "confront and contest oppressive institutional practices, to make tough decisions and work to solve community problems" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1093) which was exemplified by Thomas' work with student leaders within Greek organizations. He intentionally worked with female students and encouraged them to reclaim and utilize their power to address unfair gender dynamics within Greek life and to work as a larger community of student leaders to invoke positive change.

Staff can also fulfill the role of empowerment agent through *counterstratification* in which they help students to construct a "constellation of institutional agents that provide authentic social and/or institutional support" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1092; Whitten, 2007). Jenna, who purposefully vets other campus or community members within a variety of services and departments to ensure that they are able to adequately support her scholarship students, can be seen to be at the center of such a network. Through Jenna, students are connected to and able to access a wide network of support that includes individuals who can best support them and are sensitive to their unique needs as low-income students.

Finally, staff as empowerment agents can inform a critical consciousness, both within students and within other individuals on campus, by *decoding the system*, which includes knowing what individuals within the institution control key resources, who the individuals are that are committed to supporting marginalized students, as well as envisioning a more just social order (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). This concept of decoding could be tied to the notion of a hidden curriculum (Witenko et al., 2017), which directs attention to how students come to understand the implicit and unspoken rules that are folded into an institution. For example, Witenko et al.'s study in a K-12 setting indicated that even when a school declares that it no longer tracks students, hidden forms of tracking are perpetuated in informal policies. Decoding the system involves helping students overcome policies that perpetuate inequities. Lydia, who has been at the university for 32 years can be seen to decode the system in her work with both undocumented and veteran students. She shared that her extensive campus experience and collaborative skills allowed her to best support these students and engage key campus

stakeholders. However, she also described how the university, state, and federal policies made it challenging to fully support undocumented students in the way that she wanted. As a result, she has "flipped" her approach to policy interpretation to expand the support that is possible for these students.

The present study demonstrates the value of utilizing a social capital framework (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) to help us understand the role that professional staff play in a college student's experience. Given their institutional knowledge and network (Graham, 2012), staff are well-positioned to act as *institutional agents* and bridge access to valuable forms of social capital. However, by explicitly focusing on staff who are exemplary in their support of students, we can also uncover clear examples of staff taking advantage of their potential as *empowerment agents* to improve the lives of their students, the institution itself, and society at large, which has been lacking within the literature thus far. In doing so, we begin to construct a deeper understanding of the role that professional staff play in higher education and acknowledge their contributions beyond the operational.

Implications for future research

Findings from this study echo calls for more explicit inclusion of professional staff in higher education research surrounding student support (Bensimon, 2007; Graham, 2012; Graham, 2013; Graham & Regan, 2016; Roberts, 2018). When looking through the lens of social capital, the critical role that university staff fulfill in the support, retention, and persistence of students, and particularly underrepresented students and students of color, warrants greater attention (Bensimon, 2007; Luedke, 2017). While this study did not explicitly focus on staff of color, future research could benefit from a narrower focus

on this group as research has shown that staff of color can more effectively nurture the capital a student already possesses compared to white staff (Luedke, 2017).

More generally, future research should include campus staff in their explorations of how students are supported in higher education in order to properly address the growing proportion of professional staff within higher education (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014; Frye & Fulton, 2020). Further, staff should fulfill a variety of roles to ensure that we are including professionals who may work outside of what can be considered traditional support roles, such as student affairs. While the majority of staff within the present study are classified as student affairs, we were also able to see the impact that staff from departments such as housing, recreation, and emergency management have. While faculty undoubtedly play a pivotal role in the education and support of students, the literature on support networks outside of this population remains small.

Implications for practice

Interviews with campus staff reveal areas for improvement at both the individual and institutional level. Individually, it can be seen how staff who successfully support students are those who demonstrate empathy, make themselves available to students, proactively utilize their skills and institutional networks to help students, and intentionally aim to empower the students they serve. For white professional staff, acknowledging a student's cultural background and valuing their capital would improve their ability to authentically support students and in particular, students of color with whom they do not share the same cultural background (Luedke, 2017). All of these would be beneficial for staff at large to incorporate into their work with students, and for first-

generation staff and staff of color to be resources for training others on how to appropriately recognize and value student's cultural capital (Yosso, 2000) as white participants in this study did not reference this explicitly in their interviews in the way that staff of color did. However, it is also important that institutions not place the responsibility for equity training solely on the shoulders of those who are already marginalized within the university.

Staff participants shared that they perceived campus staff to be isolated from one another and that intercampus communication and collaboration were not the norm. A desire to better connect and work together across campus was expressed by multiple participants, with some addressing that the structure of the university itself was not conducive to this. Some participants also expressed a desire for the campus and its leadership to better unify staff and promote collaboration by more clearly outlining the long-term vision for the university.

In addition, one implication for practice is for university administrators to more fully acknowledge and understand the impact that staff have on student learning outside of the classroom. There are abundant societal complaints that not enough is being done by universities to prepare students for the real world. An intriguing suggestion from this study is that professional staff have a role in preparing students for 21st century skill sets. Arguably, faculty focus most directly on the world of theory and research vis a vis students. Staff, in falling into their various roles of student support, indeed appear to be helping students with critical work force skills. These may include managing conflict, being prepared, and being respectful in written communication—all areas of staff contribution that could receive greater acknowledgement by universities.

Finally, while it is clear that having an extensive campus network helps staff to connect and support students more effectively, this network is something that is built over time. With that in mind, it is important to recognize the current challenges in employee retention, particularly when considering wage compensation, which was cited by multiple participants as lacking. Without providing more competitive pay, staff may be less inclined to continue working within the university, especially given that staff often cited the additional workload that comes with insufficient staffing levels. Further, while staff in this study demonstrated a willingness to go above and beyond and make themselves available outside of working hours for students, it is imperative that we critically engage with that expectation without acknowledging the budgetary and staffing limitations imposed by the university that necessitate it. However, by expanding our understanding of the role that professional staff play in higher education, we may better be able to acknowledge the various forms of support they provide and greater advocacy for their security and compensation may be possible.

Conclusion

The present study sought to identify key characteristics of professional university staff who are exemplary in their support of students. Interviews with staff across multiple roles within a single university reveal common characteristics of impactful professional staff, including a fulfillment from student connection and growth, a willingness to make themselves available, listening to student needs, and demonstrating honesty and empathy. Staff were also seen to leverage their networks to connect students to resources and opportunities more effectively. Utilizing a social capital framework for institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011), we can uncover the ways in which professional staff can

support and empower college students. In doing so, we inform our understanding of the importance of professional staff on college campuses and highlight the necessity of including this population when considering student support and retention in higher education.

Endnote

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CHAPTER FOUR

"I Wouldn't Be Here Without Her": Exploring the Nature and Impact of Student-Staff Relationships in One University

Introduction

The relationships a college student makes outside of the classroom at their institution can have a positive impact on their academic and social well-being. Prior research has shown that positive relationships with university agents can improve undergraduate student academic success and increase graduate aspirations (Hanson et al., 2016; Means & Pyne, 2017; Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019; Trolian & Parker, 2017), encourage student participation in campus organizations, internships, and scholarship programs (Palmer & Gasman, 2008) and make students feel welcome on campus (Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019). Looking at these relationships through a social capital lens (Bourdieu, 1973; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), institutional actors such as faculty and staff are well-positioned to provide support to students and bridge access to further opportunities on campus.

Much of the research exploring these influential relationships focus on the relationships formed between students and faculty (Bensimon, 2007; Graham, 2012; Graham, 2013; Graham & Regan, 2016; Roberts, 2018). In a recent survey of more than 2,000 undergraduate students across the United States, 44% identified a professor as someone who knows them best. However, 14% indicated a campus staff member or supervisor as knowing them best and 8% indicated a dining hall worker or janitor (College Pulse, 2022). Recognizing that individuals across a variety of roles can connect and form relationships with students, his study employs a qualitative interviewing

approach to explore the ways in which students at one public, research university are impacted by professional staff, defined as those who are not directly involved the teaching of students. Given both their status and network within the institution, as well as their knowledge of university operations and resources (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018; Graham, 2012; Roberts, 2018), professional staff are acknowledged as potential institutional and empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and sources for positive student support outside of the classroom.

The current exploratory study investigates how students at one university describe their relationships with impactful staff and what role those relationships play in their student experience. While research has demonstrated the benefits of these supportive professional staff members, this study seeks to identify undergraduate students' perceptions of key traits of these institutional actors. In doing so, we can better understand what role these positive institutional relationships play in students navigating and persisting within the university setting and what supportive staff members look like in action. Akin to Mireles-Rios and Garcia's (2019) observations about graduate student mentors, students may view professional staff as more approachable and less intimidating than faculty. Further, because staff do not assign grades to students, they may feel less vulnerable in these relationships (Luedke, 2017). Findings from this study demonstrate the positive impact that staff relationships can have for students and the ways in which they can foster supportive relationships with students.

Statement of the problem

Within the research on institutional relationships and their impact on student success, comparatively little is known about the role professional staff play in student

persistence and well-being compared to faculty. The current study aims to bridge that gap by explicitly focusing on the relationships that students form with professional university staff who are not working in an academic capacity. By applying a social capital framework (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) to professional staff who are well-connected within the university and possess extensive institutional knowledge (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018; Graham, 2012), we can better recognize the potential for these individuals to share institutional resources with students and identify ways in which they impact the students they serve.

While students may form relationships with a variety of institutional actors who contribute to their university experience and ultimate persistence, including faculty, staff, and peers, this study allows for a deeper understanding of the student-staff relationship. This study not only further enriches our understanding of students' relationships with professional staff and the role it plays in their higher education experience but also captures the unique perspectives of the students who have formed those relationships to address what qualities in these staff are most important. Understanding how students interact with professional staff and what factors are important to them in building positive relationships is critical if we hope to better understand how professional staff can best support students outside of the classroom and through the university.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of the current study is to qualitatively explore the student-professional staff relationship in the university context from the perspective of students themselves. This study aims to identify students' perceptions of key traits among

professional staff at one university that they consider impactful in their experience. In doing so, the findings can help to identify ways in which students are connected to professional staff and how those staff might maximize their potential as both institutional and empowerment agents in supporting students. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What qualities or characteristics do students describe as most important when building relationships with university staff?
2. What impact do relationships with professional staff have on the student college experience?

Positioning professional university staff as key individuals with the potential to provide important student support, this study aims to improve our understanding of how relationships with university agents impact the student experience and acknowledge the variety of people who can fulfill that role. By utilizing Stanton-Salazar's (2011) framework for institutional agents to professional staff in the higher education setting, this study acknowledges the capacity of staff to support the academic and social well-being of students outside of the classroom. Giving voice to the students themselves, findings from this study illuminate the integral role that these individuals on college campuses can play in students persisting and succeeding in their higher education career.

Literature review

While academic success and engagement are an important aspect of a student's higher education experience and success, the relationships that students form on campus with faculty and staff play a role in their persistence within the university (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). In particular, positive interactions with these individuals can improve a

students' sense of belonging (Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton et al., 2000). Positive experiences with campus faculty or staff can also improve academic success, persistence, and increase graduate aspirations (Hanson et al., 2016; Means & Pyne, 2017; Trolian & Parker, 2017).

Along with academic support, positive interactions with faculty and administrators can support students in their social endeavors at the university by encouraging student participation in campus organizations, internships, and scholarship programs (Palmer & Gasman, 2008) and making students feel welcome on campus (Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019). These individuals do so by building trusting relationships, going above and beyond their assigned duties to be available for students when needed, and in some cases, sharing a common identity with the students they support (Dowd et al., 2013; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Museus & Neville, 2012). While these key institutional actors can include faculty, administrators, and professional staff, the latter group is noticeably absent in the research on college student success, especially when compared to research on success in K-12 education (Bensimon, 2007). This gap has been criticized (Bensimon, 2007; Graham, 2012; Graham, 2013; Graham & Regan, 2016; Roberts, 2018), because while faculty are often the focus within research on student success, they contribute to a smaller number of services compared to professional staff (Graham, 2012).

The role of professional staff in student success

Professional staff possess much of the "systemic knowledge, the intellectual capital" (Graham, 2012, p. 439) that are key to university operations (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018) and as such, have access to significant sources of capital that could

benefit students both academically and socially. Distinguishing between faculty and professional staff is important because "student-staff relationships may be significantly different than student-faculty relationships because staff do not assign grades to students" which "may enhance the level of vulnerability that students have with staff and administrators in comparison with faculty" (Luedke, 2017, p. 38). Considered in the context of the growing professionalization of higher education and number of professional staff (Bossu & Brown, 2018; Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014), understanding the nature of the relationships between students and this population is important if we want to better understand the ways in which they contribute to student success.

Understanding students' perceptions of the qualities they believe are important in student-staff relationships is particularly critical when considering inequities in higher education retention and completion for first-generation, low-income, and/or racially minoritized students. Only 21% of low-income, first-generation college students earn a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to 66% of higher-income, continuing-generation students (Cahalan et al., 2020). Forty-six percent of Black college students will complete their degree program in six years compared to 55% of Latina/o students and 67% of White students (Shapiro et al., 2017). For these students, the relationships they form at their institution can play a pivotal role in their success.

For students of color in particular, staff can build trusting relationships and a sense of belonging, improve a student's confidence in their ability to succeed, validate their collegiate identity, counter negative stereotypes, and connect students to critical campus resources and opportunities (Dowd et al., 2013; Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Museus & Neville, 2012; Rodríguez et al., 2013). These individuals are

able to do so by communicating with students authentically and building trusting relationships, going above and beyond their assigned duties to be available for students when needed, taking the time to get to know students individually, and sharing a common identity or background (Dowd et al., 2013; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Museus & Neville, 2012; Schreiner et al., 2011).

Understanding the impact of the relationships that students have with professional staff in the university is an important piece in understanding how universities, and the individuals within them, can support student success, persistence, and aspirations. Importantly, this must include those outside of the faculty role. As Bensimon (2007) highlights:

> If our goal is to do scholarship that makes a difference in the lives of students whom higher education has been least successful in educating (e.g., racially marginalized groups and the poor), we have to expand the scholarship on student success and take into account the influence of practitioners—positively and negatively. (p. 445)

In doing so, we will not only begin to paint a fuller picture of how students are supported through the university, but also identify the ways in which professional staff have the capacity to support and empower students who feel marginalized from the college experience.

Theoretical framework

Understanding the increasing numbers of professional staff in higher education (Bossu & Brown, 2018; Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014) and the unique nature of student-staff relationships (Luedke, 2017), this study draws on a social capital lens to explore

student-staff relationships. Many theories related to inequities in higher education success are rooted in Bourdieu's (1973) theory of social reproduction. One of the key concepts of this theoretical framework is cultural capital, which may include "informal interpersonal skills, habits, manners, linguistics, educational credentials, and lifestyle preferences" (Berger, 2000, p. 97). While cultural capital is a symbolic resource, it can be used by individuals to increase their status in society and further accumulate more capital (Berger, 2000). In the educational context, schools may place greater value on certain forms of cultural capital, often those already valued in the greater societal context, thereby reproducing and legitimizing social structures and inequities (Bourdieu, 1973). Applied to higher education, this framework can help to explain why upper-class White students experience higher graduation rates than their lower-income, non-White peers as a result of their greater access to the valued forms of capital in the university context. Through this lens, disparate access to valued forms of capital can be viewed as a mechanism by which those with lesser access can be further marginalized.

Recognizing the unique and critical forms of support to which university professional staff have access, this study positions professional staff as those with the capacity to act as both institutional and empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Building on the concept of social capital, institutional agents are "high-status, non-kin, agents who occupy relatively high positions" and "who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1066). An individual with the capacity to act as an institutional agent does so when they "act to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources" (Stanton-Salazar 2011, p. 1067). These resources fall into two major categories and can be

positional, in which they are linked to the particular position that individual fulfills, or they can be personal, in which they are linked to the individual themselves, regardless of their role.

Those individuals with access to these forms of social capital can often work as *gate-keeping agents*, who "whether consciously or unconsciously . . . [provide] institutional support to those privileged, by class or race," and have access to the capital that is valued by the institution (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1076). Following a Bordieuan theory of social reproduction, these individuals would contribute to the reproduction of inequality, regardless of intent. However, these individuals can "go counter to the established social structure, and to 'alter the destinies' of those located on the lower rungs of hierarchy who typically are not allocated the institution's high-status resources and rewards" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1086). Moving beyond just providing resources to help students succeed in education, institutional agents have the capacity to act as *empowerment agents*, in which they "not only fulfill a commitment to provide key resources to disenfranchised youth within their reach, they also engage them in collaborative networking to *change the world*" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1093). This requires the individual to go against the norms of their institution and work alongside the student. This is no easy task when higher education as an institution historically has served as a site of reproduction for class and racial inequality.

Within this framework, university professional staff are well-situated to act as both institutional and empowerment agents on behalf of students. Professional staff fulfill a wide variety of roles on campus, each having its own positional access to important institutional resources. Applying this model, some roles may lend themselves to one form

of support more than others. Individuals with more experience and institutional knowledge may be able to connect students to a broader network and refer them to other key agents as needed. This model encourages them to go beyond providing the resources and work to dismantle the systems that prevent students who feel marginalized from having equal access to these resources or knowledge in the first place. Through this framework, this study aims to understand the ways in which staff form relationships with students and critically examine the ways in which they nurture and provide social capital at their institution. Additionally, key characteristics of supportive staff will be identified by student participants to determine what sorts of inherent qualities or learned behaviors can be utilized by staff to best support the students they interact with.

Context of the study

This study takes place within one public research university in California. As a Tier 1 research university, faculty are expected to produce novel research in addition to the education of students. On one hand, this provides students with the opportunity to engage with faculty in the research process. On the other, it means that faculty have dual commitments, and there is evidence that faculty at research universities spend less time directly advising students compared to other institution types (Milem et al., 2000). Students may therefore seek support from staff on campus more frequently. As a large university with approximately 23,000 undergraduate students, the university employs over 3,300 full-time, non-academic employees (excluding student staff) compared to approximately 1,200 full-time faculty staff. Designated as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), the university is classified as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) with 28%

of undergraduates identifying as Chicano/Latino and 30% identify as American Indian/Native American or Asian/Pacific Islander.

This study was conducted between October 2021 and January 2022. During this time, the university had resumed in-person instruction and most in-person activities after being remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. For many students, this was their first quarter on the university campus even if they were not a first-year student. This context is crucial in understanding the atypical nature of the student participants' experiences compared to pre-pandemic years. The opportunities that normally existed for students to engage on campus and connect with others were either nonexistent or drastically different. While instruction had resumed in-person, many campus offices and support services were still operating remotely, meaning students were not able to walk into various offices and meet with staff face-to-face. For the student participants their interactions with staff were mostly, or entirely, virtual. Understanding the severe challenges in maintaining a sense of campus community and providing the same level of support to students in a remote or hybrid context, this study becomes even more important in understanding the roles that staff play and the ways they can better connect and support students on campus.

Methodology

To better understand how students experience and describe their relationships with impactful staff on campus, brief semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students at a single public research university. Participants were encouraged to describe their own experiences with professional staff they considered impactful and identify key factors that are perceived to be important in forming

supportive relationships with staff on campus. Interview data were analyzed with the support of qualitative analysis software to identify common experiences or descriptions of staff relationships in the spirit of a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to the interview, student participants were provided an online questionnaire to collect demographic information, as well as elicit their perceived importance of various campus support services in their student experience.

Participants

Participants in this study included 18 undergraduate college students at a single university. Participants were recruited upon recommendation from select campus staff at that university (*elaborated under Data Collection*). Criteria for student participants included being a current undergraduate student and having established one or more positive relationships with campus staff during their time as a student, not including faculty. Details about the student participants can be found in Table 1. All participants were of traditional age (18-22 years) and entered the university as first-year freshmen. Given the nature of the pandemic and remote disruption between March 2020 and September 2021, the majority of student participant recommendations were seniors, as it has been more difficult for newer students to meet and interact with staff. In total, 11 of the 18 participants had senior class standing, representing a greater amount of experience within the university. Regarding gender identity, participants were uneven with 14 identifying as a woman, three as a man, and one as gender non-conforming. Racial demographics were more diverse than the larger campus demographics with six (33%) identifying as Latina/o, eight (44%) identifying as Asian, one (5%) identifying as Black/African American and three (17%) identifying as White. The sizeable proportion

Table 1
Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Student Class Level	Age (Years)	Self-Identified Gender	Self-identified Ethnicity	First-Generation College Student
Andrea	Senior	21	Woman	Hispanic/Latina	Yes
Ben	Sophomore	19	Man	White	No
Claire	Senior	21	Woman	Hispanic/Latina	Yes
Damien	Senior	22	Man	Asian	Yes
Diana	Senior	21	Woman	Hispanic/Latina	Yes
Hannah	Senior	21	Non-conforming	Hispanic/Latinx	No
Isaac	Junior	20	Man	Hispanic/Latino	Yes
Jessica	Senior	21	Woman	Hispanic/Latina	Yes
Kelsey	Senior	21	Woman	White	No
Lily	Sophomore	19	Woman	Asian	No
Melissa	Senior	21	Woman	Asian	No
Miranda	Sophomore	19	Woman	Asian	No
Nancy	Senior	21	Woman	Asian	Yes
Robin	Senior	21	Woman	Asian	No
Sonya	Freshman	18	Woman	White	No
Stacy	Senior	21	Woman	Asian	No
Tiffany	Junior	20	Woman	Asian	No
Vivian	Freshman	18	Woman	Black/African American	No

of Asian and Latina/o students (14 of 18) reflects the university's composition as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) with 28% of undergraduates identifying as Chicano/Latino and 30% identifying as American Indian/Native American or Asian/Pacific Islander (previously described). Of the participant group, seven (39%)

identify as first-generation college students, which reflects the campus-wide undergraduate population of first-generation students.

Role of the researcher

When undertaking qualitative forms of inquiry, researchers should aim to set aside their experiences and beliefs to present a new perspective (e.g., Moustakas, 1994). However, it is important to acknowledge my role and experience within the context of the university in which this study takes place and how it inevitably influences this research. In addition to my position as a graduate student and researcher, I am employed by the university and have worked as a professional staff member for over seven years. As a result, I am deeply connected to this particular university and have established relationships with both students and professional staff. As part of my professional role, I indirectly supervise a large team of students, though none were invited to participate in this study to avoid any potential conflict of interest or biased results. While none of the students interviewed had any sort of prior relationship to me on campus, it is important to recognize the role that my connections on campus play in this research study. My familiarity with campus allowed me to establish rapport with some participants, at times leading to post-interview discussions about my own experiences at the university and further elaboration on the research study, as well as allowing me to more easily understand some of the references made by interviewees to various campus programs and resources.

While student participants were encouraged not to identify any staff members by name, many did, and it was important for me to remain impartial even when I knew that individual. While rapport in some instances may have been easier to build, I would be

remiss to not acknowledge the ways in which my position as a campus staff member may have made student participants hesitant to discuss any negative experiences or critiques of the institution or staff members. While many did so, it is possible that some participants may have been reserved in their answers. It was emphasized with each participant at the start of each interview that they were encouraged to speak freely and that any identifiable information that could be connected either to themselves or the staff they were discussing would be omitted from the research study. Understanding that my position and experiences at this university undoubtedly shape my own views and perceptions, that connection also allows me to embrace institutional criticism in an effort to improve the university experience for both staff and students alike and reflect on my own biases to ensure that the voices of the participants are presented accurately.

Data collection

Participant selection criteria for this study included that the student participants have established one or more positive relationships with campus professional staff. In order to more effectively find students with these established relationships, participants were solicited by recommendation from campus staff members, some of which were participants in a prior study of staff who are considered exemplary in their support of students (*see Chapter 3*). By utilizing purposeful chain sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I was able use my connections to campus staff members to find students who were well-positioned to speak on the subject of this study. The staff member who recommended the student was not shared with participants to avoid creating any sense of obligation to then discuss that particular staff member throughout the interview. Upon recommendation, students were contacted directly by the researcher via email and invited

to participate. In total, 18 participants agreed to participate and completed both the online questionnaire and interview.

Upon confirmation of their participation and completion of the consent form, students were emailed an online questionnaire to collect demographic information as well as their perceived importance of various campus support services (Appendix D). Interviews were then arranged based on the student's availability. To best elicit the perspectives of the students on their positive relationships with campus staff, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Patton, 2002). The interview guide can be found in Appendix E. Students were encouraged to describe a staff member who they considered impactful, and questions addressed the extent of that impact, as well as what factors they considered most important in supportive staff members.

The interviews were designed to be brief, taking anywhere from 10-20 minutes to complete. Students were asked about their experiences with a staff member they had a positive experience with (*e.g., Can you think of a staff member on campus who has been particularly impactful during your time at the university? If so, what about them or your relationship with them has made them impactful?)* as well as their experiences with staff more broadly (*e.g., What sorts of things could staff do at your university to better support students?*). All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom to protect the safety of both the students and the researcher in light of COVID-19. Upon completion of both the questionnaire and interview, students were compensated with an e-gift card. Interview recordings were then transcribed either by the researcher or using transcription software. All identifying information was omitted and names replaced with a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the students and any staff members that were discussed in the interview.

Data analysis

Initial analysis of the interview data was conducted by the researcher to begin to identify commonalities within the data across participants. Interview transcripts were reviewed alongside handwritten notes to familiarize myself and generate initial concepts in relation to the research questions. Done through the lens of a social capital framework, attention was paid to how students directly or indirectly described the ways in which staff provided students with access to social capital, and/or served as empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). This initial analysis was then supplemented with qualitative analysis software (NVivo) to identify key descriptors that emerged and their frequency in the interview data. Overlapping ideas from both phases of analysis allowed for development of refined themes through a constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967) that allowed for an iterative, comparative process between transcripts. As with Mireles-Rios and Garcia (2019), excerpts from the interview responses are included in the description of the themes that were identified.

Findings

As part of the pre-interview questionnaire, students were asked to rate the importance of various campus resources in their college experience. Overall, the resource that was rated as most important was library services, which interestingly was not verbally discussed in any of the interviews. The next two most important resources in the survey were reported to be housing services and student health services, in that order. In the interviews that followed, none of these services or staff members within them were explicitly discussed by the 18 participants with the exception of housing services, demonstrating that the importance of specific resources may not be dependent on the

formation of relationships with specific staff members. From another perspective, it may also highlight that the ability to form positive relationships with staff is not isolated to those that work within offices that are frequented most often or perceived to be most important in a student's educational experience. Furthermore, the resources that surfaced in the interviews demonstrated a strong emotional connection to staff, which was not evident from the surveys.

Key staff qualities and behaviors for student support

Participants were asked to not only describe their relationship with an impactful staff member, but what factors were most important to them within those relationships, allowing us to see what supportive staff members look like in practice. Students identified common qualities that staff possessed inherently, as well as behaviors or actions that foster positive relationship building and support. The qualities described in these supportive figures included a desire to learn from students, empathy and genuinely caring for students, being kind and welcoming, and having a shared identity with the student. Most commonly reported behaviors included connecting students to resources or opportunities, making themselves available to students, sharing their own experiences, prioritizing students' academics, and having honest conversations with students. By possessing these qualities or utilizing these behaviors, students felt that they were better able to build positive, supportive relationships with campus staff.

Desire to learn from students

A key characteristic of the supportive staff described by student participants was a desire to learn from the students they work with. Andrea, a current senior, stated "One thing that I've come to really appreciate about the people that I've found as mentors in

my life is that even if they don't understand something, they want to understand and they want to learn more about the situation." This desire to learn from students was also demonstrated by staff valuing student input and treating them with respect. Tiffany described her campus job supervisor and stated, "She was always willing to listen to us. She genuinely made it feel as if we were equals with her, rather than we were just working for her. She made our voices heard." For participants, this respect for students and commitment to learning is a key attribute that helps them to feel important and engaged in the learning process alongside staff. Importantly, it communicates to students that their experiences and contributions are valued and helps to deconstruct perceived power dynamics.

Empathy and care for students

Empathy and genuine care for students was also reported as a key characteristic of supportive staff. Damien described how important it was that staff were "empathetic of what's going on [with] the situation and understanding from your own perspective what that student. . . is going through." Many students also noted that it was evident when staff were genuine in their care for students and felt that was the case with most staff within the university. Along with empathy, some participants felt that it was important for staff be open and understanding of students from a variety of backgrounds. Hannah, who identifies as gender non-conforming, stated, "It's easier to connect with someone who creates a welcoming environment, especially as someone who has marginalized identities of being LGBTQIA and also a person of color on campus." This sentiment was echoed by Melissa who said how important it was that staff make it known that students "can come to them as they need to as a safe, welcoming, nonjudgmental person." Simple

qualities such as empathy and genuine kindness made a significant difference for these students and is an integral component of these positive relationships.

Shared identity

While many students described the importance of staff creating a welcoming and inclusive space for students, for some it was beneficial to also have staff members who shared a similar identity or background. Both Damien and Nancy connected more closely with staff because they too were first-generation college students. For Nancy, getting to hear about her supervisor's journey as a first-generation student helped her to see how she could also succeed and what pathways to consider. For students of color, being able to connect with staff who share their racial identity helped to establish stronger relationships. Isaac reflected on the value of having more diverse staff and shared how "it's just fun to interact with someone that you shared some cultural characteristics with or just really get a different perspective on their cultures too." For staff who do not share these identities or backgrounds, participants emphasized the value in staff making the effort to learn about different marginalized groups and how to best support them. For Vivian, a Black, female student on campus, "having that sense of, 'they [campus staff] understand me because they put in the work to understand me' is very helpful" and she encourages staff to utilize resources to learn how to best support marginalized students.

Acting as a connector

Results also indicated that most participants (11 of 18) explicitly described staff acting as connectors for them across campus. Hannah remarked that they feel staff "have connections with each other and know a lot more than students" and that they are better able to share information and connect students with other departments or resources. For

Robin, getting custom advising and career guidance from a counselor was highly impactful in giving her direction and insight for her post-graduation plans. For some participants who are part of a scholarship program for income-eligible students, they talked about how the program director consistently sends them information, resources, and opportunities both on and off-campus almost daily via email. In the case of Hannah, a staff mentor in the LGBTQIA office was able to connect them directly to a career counselor who shared a similar educational background and career interests and as a result, was able to connect Hannah to graduate programs and resources to set them up for a successful post-graduate pathway.

For some students, staff being able to share information with them allowed them to feel more knowledgeable about the campus and how to navigate it, including feeling more confident in knowing who to reach out to for different issues and how to best communicate with staff and faculty. Along the same lines, staff used their connections to link students to other opportunities such as campus jobs. Isaac described how a staff member was able to help with a campus resident assistant (RA) hiring process and played a big role in him being selected for the position. Jessica was able to secure an internship in the Vice Chancellor's office after another staff member shared the information with her. Many of the staff described showed support by utilizing their connections as needed. When Ben was experiencing stress around midterms, a staff member reassured him "Look, I know it's a stressful time. If you need anything or have any questions about [the university], I can help connect you with people." By sharing campus knowledge and connections, students were able to not only better know where to find certain forms of

support, but also felt more confident in seeking out that support and were exposed to new opportunities for their own growth and development.

Being available for students

At the core, students shared that one of the most impactful behaviors shown by campus staff was just making themselves available to talk and get to know students in a reciprocal way. Some described staff who made themselves available any time by sharing a personal phone number, whereas others held established "office hours" for students to come meet with them and discuss anything. Hannah described their staff mentor having "weekly or biweekly check-ins, and it was just someone that I could go to to talk to about school, about life lessons, about just things that he had to share with me, that I really appreciated." For Tiffany, just checking in with how she was doing personally and staff being willing to get to know her on a deeper level was what made the difference.

Participants described how valuable it was for staff to have an open-door policy and be available for issues that extended beyond their direct position. Lily, who was able to build relationships with staff through a university-facilitated book club, said that her new mentors were "open about their own personal experiences and things in order to help me understand my own difficulties and struggles and growth." In doing so, staff were not only able to better get to know the students they support, but could humanize the experience and build more trusting, personal relationships.

Impact of positive student-staff relationships

Student participants were asked how their relationships with supportive staff members impacted their college experience. It was evident that through the qualities and practices described, these campus staff had a significant impact on the student with whom

they established relationships. At its core, students reported that by connecting with campus staff, they now had an informal mentor and source of support they could go to during their time at the university. However, in some cases students shared that their relationship with a staff member was the reason they have continued to attend the university. Additionally, students reported that these relationships fostered personal and professional growth, a sense of belonging and improved confidence, as well as an ability to support their peers.

Retention

For some students, their relationship with a staff member was a key factor in their retention at the university. Diana, a low-income student who chose this university based on a financial scholarship program for which she was selected, shared that the scholarship program director was an integral figure her freshman year. Not only did the scholarship provide critical financial support, but she stated:

> My freshman year I wanted to drop out of college because I was in the wrong major taking Chemistry classes and that was not a good fit for me. I thought my only option was dropping out or switching to a community college. And that is the one time I did go to her, and she just reassured me that I could change my major [or] pass/no pass the class.

By being encouraged to stay and find a more suitable major program, Diana was able to remain a student at the university and is now a senior in a major that she enjoys and has been successful in.

Many students described how difficult the past year had been while university instruction was delivered remotely. For Melissa, navigating coursework online during the

pandemic took a toll on her mental health and she seriously considered withdrawing from the university to take some time off. However, her campus job and supervisor provided her with motivation and a reason to stay by giving her leadership opportunities and a higher level of responsibility.

> I feel like that trust in me that she had, and the idea that I had somebody to go to, even if things were struggling and it was kind of okay, that made it easier for me to—it didn't even give me the option to drop out.

Not all students reported similar situations, but these examples illustrate how pivotal a positive staff member can be in more extreme circumstances when a student has intentions to leave the university.

Growth and development

Particularly for the students who described a supportive staff supervisor for a campus job, they felt that their relationship and the provided support allowed for both personal and professional growth. Miranda's first campus job and supervisor helped her to learn a lot about what it means to be in a professional environment. For Kelsey, her supervisor "helped with my writing skills like email etiquette and dealing with others in a professional manner" which she hopes to utilize in her future career. Beyond specific skills, student also reported that staff recognized their leadership potential and actively gave them opportunities to develop their own leadership skills. In Melissa's case, her supervisor told her that she had potential and she said they "gave me constructive things to work on and really were fundamental in me becoming the student leader, but also just the person that I am right now." While these discussions around growth mostly centered around student employment and staff supervisors, we can see how influential the

supervisor role can be and how valuable that professional support is for the students as they move through and beyond the university.

Improved sense of belonging and confidence

Students also reported that the support and guidance from campus staff allowed them to feel more connected to the university and find their sense of belonging. When asked how her experience would have differed had she not met the scholarship director her first year, Jessica stated, "I think it would have been truly, significantly different just because I truly did struggle finding my sense of belonging on campus and my community." Her relationship with the director not only connected her to other campus resources, but to a peer network of scholarship recipients. For some students struggling with the transition, staff support was integral as was the case with Melissa who shared that her supervisor "believed in me because [when] I was coming in, I was facing a lot of imposter syndrome. It was really hard for me to make friends. I had not found my community, my place on campus yet."

In addition to feeling more integrated into the campus community, staff relationships were also reported to help students build their confidence. In many cases this included feeling more confident knowing who to reach out to on campus for various issues and how to navigate conversations with staff and faculty. More generally, staff support also helpd students to find their voice. Stacy, now a senior, reflected on her time at the university and her relationship with her advisors for Greek life. Considering herself an introvert, she said, "I think I am a lot more outgoing since meeting them and I can recognize more of my strengths." This improved confidence helped her to speak more

openly in the classroom, as well as feel more prepared and confident with her post-graduate pursuits.

Secondary support

Finally, an impact of supportive staff relationships was that students now felt more knowledgeable and capable to support other students. Lily, who built relationships with staff from a campus book club, actively tried to get her friends to see the value in connecting with campus staff. She believes in the value of these relationships and shared that she is "trying to help my friends and other people that I meet too. Just sharing whatever I can and pass it on because it's been really helpful." Damien, a first-generation student, stated how he is able to use all that he has learned from a staff mentor to better support his sister who attends another university. He said, "It's great to sort of ripple that knowledge out to her, being a role model as well." In this way we can see the secondary support that staff are able to provide and the ways they may unknowingly support students they do not interact with directly. By guiding students and equipping them with more institutional knowledge, they provide students with the tools needed to then assist their peers or community and pay it forward.

Barriers to relationship building

As part of the interview students were asked what they would recommend staff do at their university to better support students. Responses provided insight into two significant barriers that exist that may make it difficult for students to form these sorts of supportive, positive relationships with campus professional staff more often. First, many students shared that their staff relationships helped them to feel more confident interacting with other campus actors, including staff and faculty. However, there was a

clear perception of an "unofficial hierarchy," as Stacy described. Students shared, whether on their own behalf of or that of their peers, that students may be hesitant to reach out to campus staff. Damien described this hesitancy as rooted in intimidation.

> They think it's hard for them to talk, to reach out, to a staff member [or] to their professor, or any age above them because they're intimidated. They're sort of shy to engage. They feel like they're wasting their time. They feel like they're gonna be judged.

This intimidation may be particularly salient for new students. In the context of the pandemic and students returning to campus after being remote for so long, Sonya stated:

> A lot of students coming in can be very intimidated by all the new faces and all these new resources that they have in front of them. . . I think that's very important because I think a lot of students can be intimidated approaching all these new support systems.

This was echoed by Jessica who felt scared to reach out to staff her freshman year. For students who are already unfamiliar with campus resources and unsure of where to reach out to for support, a perceived power dynamic between students and staff can prevent students from utilizing important resources or seeking help when it is needed.

Similarly, students reported a sense of separation on campus. Jessica stated, "There is kind of a disconnect between the student population and staff" and many participants shared similar sentiments. Heightened by the pandemic, participants conveyed a desire to connect with staff and felt that visibility and accessibility were significant challenges.

> I think that they could make an effort to be more accessible, and to reach out to the community of students, whether that's like holding office hours or luncheons or something like that. Because it does take effort on the students end to reach out and keep those relationships. But sometimes you don't even know that those resources are there. (Hannah)
>
> And they're all great amazing people who genuinely care about students, but I feel like we don't actually get to see them. We don't get to meet them and get to know who those individuals are unless you work for them. So for the majority of students, I think they need to get those opportunities to have those one-on-one interactions and actually hear from them and see how they are as individuals. (Tiffany)

A frequent recommendation by participants was for staff to conduct more outreach on campus and to make intentional efforts to connect with students, rather than waiting for students to reach out on their own. Some suggestions included staff resource fairs or open hours in which students can learn more about what resources exist on campus and learn more about the staff who provide various services. Sonya described the importance of visibility, stating:

> I think that's a great way to connect with students, is just being present on campus and in a space that you can easily be seen. Because I think the [university] campus is super big and spread out and if you're just staying in your office the whole time, no one's going to find you.

While students shared clear value in building relationships with campus staff, making the initial connection is perceived as a primary obstacle. In the context of COVID and the

gradual return of in-person services, that face-to-face interaction and connection is considered to be critical for students in the ability to build relationships with staff effectively. Without intentional efforts to be visible and accessible, students are required to take the imitative to reach out. Considered alongside the sense of intimidation students felt, students may be left with little opportunity to connect with and receive support from campus staff.

Discussion

Interviews with college students about their relationships with impactful campus staff members demonstrate university professional staff are well-positioned to provide crucial support for students. Utilizing a social capital framework such as that presented by Stanton-Salazar (2011), stories shared by the students in this study reveal the ways in which staff utilized their resources and network on campus to support students. Stanton-Salazar's (2011) framework for institutional agents is a compelling lens in which to look at student-staff relationships in higher education when considering the frequency with which students reported impactful staff *acting as connectors* as an impactful staff behavior. For many students, staff were able to direct students to other individuals or departments on campus to receive more specialized support. In this way, staff can be considered to have the capacity to provide institutional support by acting as resource agents by utilizing positional resources and knowledge to bridge access to further opportunities on campus (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Accordingly, staff who provided support that allowed for *growth and development*, and/or an *improved sense of belonging and confidence* were described by students as acting as *networking coaches,* which includes sharing "knowledge of how to

negotiate with, and access resources from, various gatekeepers and agents within and outside of the school environment (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1099). This was seen with Kelsey, whose relationship with her supervisor improved her professional writing and communication skills which she carried forward to communicate with faculty, or Stacy who feels more confident and outgoing in her campus interactions with faculty, staff, and other students. Finally, staff also fulfilled a general *advisor* role when they *made themselves available*, demonstrated *empathy and care*, and a *desire to learn from students* by "co-assessing problems and helping the individual [student] make appropriate and effective decisions" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1099). Both Andrea and Tiffany felt like they could speak up in their campus jobs and their supervisors sought their input on various decisions. These reflect just some of the ways we see professional staff as possessing the potential to act as influential institutional agents.

Students did not generally describe staff as acting as empowerment agents in the sense that they were actively working alongside students to dismantle oppressive systems, such as that of the university, which mirrors prior research (Dowd et al., 2013; Schreiner et al., 2011); however, students revealed the ripple effect of staff support and their own ability to now better support their peers as they navigate the university. Considering staff as connectors for students within their networks, these individuals possess a positive network orientation that "signals an awareness that networks can be a powerful problem-solving and resource system" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1094). Additionally, staff were seen to help students with coping strategies which can include problem-solving skills, networking ability, and other behaviors to overcome barriers (Stanton-Salazar 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). Examples

of staff providing individual empowerment were seen, with some participants describing how staff made them more confident or helped them to overcome imposter syndrome, but there were not instances of staff actively working alongside students to change the institution in a meaningful way. From the student perception, this next level of staff *critical consciousness* may not be as visible when compared to the direct ways that staff provide support to move students through the university.

The present study highlights the variety of ways in which university professional staff *have the capacity* to serve as institutional agents and the additional steps they could take to act as empowerment agents to avoid perpetuating social inequality in higher education. Presenting a promising framework in which to better understand the role that professional staff play in higher education, the ways in which staff provide students with access with important social capital in the university setting helps to paint a fuller picture of the myriad ways that students are supported through their college experience and what supports their retention.

The ways in which students described their relationships with professional staff illuminate the need to expand our understanding of student support on college campuses to be inclusive of various roles. Many of the staff who students felt were most impactful fell outside of what we might consider a traditional support role, yet were still able to provide mentorship, guidance, and access to resources. Many also described a relationship with their campus supervisor and articulated a relationship that moves beyond what we might expect from a supervisor-supervisee relationship. While only 14% of undergraduates in a national survey indicated a campus staff member or a supervisor as the indicated a campus staff member or supervisor as the person who knows them best

(College Pulse, 2022), findings from this study reveal the profound impact that these individuals can have on students. From helping students reach out to other staff to encouraging a student to persist within the university, this overlooked population plays an important role in student success and future research would benefit from being inclusive of this group.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Most significantly, the timing of this study amid a global pandemic and an unusual in-person return to campus after a year and a half of remote instruction is a highly unique context in which to look at student-staff relationships. The ways in which students were able to connect with campus staff looked very different than typical, with many of these connections happening virtually. This may also explain why the participants were predominantly in their senior year. Given that participants were solicited from campus staff, underclassmen were likely less able to form relationships with staff virtually, making them less likely to be recommended for this study. While interviews with senior students helped to illuminate the longer-term impacts of positive student-staff relationships, further research into how students are connected to staff early on in their college experience could help us to understand what factors play into that initial connection and how those relationships can best be facilitated. Further research should include students across class levels, as well as both first-year and transfer students to better understand the variety of ways in which students connect with staff. Additionally, expanding this study beyond a single campus may give further weight to the findings across contexts and identify similarities across institutions.

Given the way that participants were solicited, only those who had established at least one positive relationship with a campus staff member were included. This provides insight into the benefits and value of these relationships but does not allow for a deeper investigation into why students do not form positive relationships with staff. As shared in the interviews, even those who did have a campus staff member to which they had a relationship, there was a perceived disconnect between students and staff. Including the perspectives of students who have not formed these relationships or have not had positive interactions with staff may provide insight into that disconnect and uncover what prevents students from seeking or receiving support from staff and how staff can better serve the students on their campus.

Implications for practice

For those working in higher education, participants in this study provided valuable insight into what needs to be done, at both an institutional and individual level, for staff to better support students. Considering how impactful it was for students when they were connected by staff to other people or resources on campuses, the need for well-connected staff is evident. Having a more diverse and expansive network is necessary for impactful institutional agents who act strategically to provide students with institutional support (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and the more connected staff are to others on campus, the better they can then connect students to critical resources. At the individual level, this means staff need to be intentional about building relationships across campus, however more importantly, the institution needs to foster stronger cross-functional collaboration across campus. Reflecting calls for improved pedagogical partnerships (Graham &

Regan, 2016; Palmer & Gasman, 2008), better campus collaboration (including faculty) can improve one's capacity to serve as an institutional agent.

Students also shared a perceived hierarchy on campus that makes students hesitant to reach out to staff, similar to Mireles-Rios and Garcia's (2019) finding that students may feel overwhelmed and stressed about having to initiate conversations with faculty. Intentional outreach and efforts to make themselves visible may help staff to connect with students. Many students shared that staff were not always known to students and the most common recommendation was that staff participate in events, such as tabling or informal meetings to inform students on what role(s) they serve, make themselves accessible, and better reach students. Considering the pandemic context for these student participants, this recommendation may reflect a larger desire to connect with campus staff and a critical gap that forms when staff are serving students remotely.

Finally, findings from this study support existing calls in the literature for more diverse staffing (Dayton et al., 2004; Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019; Museus & Neville, 2012). Students shared how important it was for staff to recognize the diversity in student background and experiences and take that into consideration when working with them. In addition, being able to connect with staff who shared their identity helped to establish stronger relationships. Educating staff on the needs of various groups who may feel marginalized from the college experience and the need to embody an equity mindset (Bensimon, 2007; Means & Pyne, 2017) can enable them to create more inclusive, welcoming, and understanding spaces which students reported to be integral in their positive staff relationships. While this is well supported in

the literature, students may feel as though this is not happening at this university under study where they desire greater outreach and intentional efforts to connect from staff.

Conclusion

The present study sought to identify what students perceived to be key characteristics of supportive staff members and better understand the impact of positive student-staff relationships in higher education. Interviews with undergraduate students within a single university reveal common characteristics of impactful professional staff, including a desire to learn from students, empathy and genuine care and sharing a similar background or identity. Staff were able to best support students by acting as connectors to campus resources and other campus agents, as well as making themselves available for students as needed. In doing so, staff were able to build positive, supportive relationships with students which then promoted student retention, growth and development, improved their confidence and sense of belonging, and allowed students to then provide further support to others. Applying a social capital framework for institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011), we can see the ways in which professional staff play a critical role on campus in the support of students through their campus knowledge and network. Understanding the ways in which staff can provide this support and what factors are most important to the students they serve can assist professional staff in maximizing their potential to provide support. Furthermore, it can inform our understanding of the importance of professional staff on college campuses and highlight the necessity of including this population when considering student support and retention in higher education.

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CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Presented together, the three studies included in this dissertation help to provide a fuller picture of the role that professional staff play in higher education and in particular, the ways in which they support positive student outcomes at the university. Together, the studies provide an exploration of student-staff relationships that enriches our understanding of what student support at today's universities can look like in practice. Further, by utilizing a conceptual framework centered on the authentic support and empowerment of students (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; 2011), we can work towards recognizing the role that professional staff play in the university context and their contributions to the student experience. The following sections present a summary of the studies' findings, study themes, and individual and institutional recommendations for practice.

Summary of findings

As seen in Chapter 2, drawing on Folkman and Lazarus' (1984) conception of stress, relationships with students play a significant role in the workplace experiences of student-supervising college staff. Although the desire to connect with college students and support them in their growth was found to be a primary motivator for visitor center professionals in six universities, their work with students was also found to be a source of work stress. Staff reported that helping students through challenges and connecting them with appropriate resources was a valued aspect of their work; however, when students brought forward challenges that extended beyond their available resources, staff experienced significant stress. Heightened by larger sociopolitical factors such as the

pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement, several staff felt that the issues that their students were facing were growing larger and more extreme, and as such, their ability to fully support students in the ways that they wanted was growing smaller. Importantly, even within a staff supervisor-student supervisee relationship, there was a level of trust and vulnerability demonstrated by the students who brought forward personal issues and crises, calling attention to the value of student-staff relationships in the university context for both parties.

To further our understanding of these student-staff relationships, *Chapters 3* and *4* explored positive student-staff relationships within a single university to better identify the ways in which professional staff can support students and how they may positively impact student retention and well-being, with particular emphasis on the ways in which they share valuable social capital resources. In *Chapter 3*, we can see what an exceptionally supportive staff member looks like in action through interviews with professional staff across a variety of departments and roles who have been previously nominated by their institution for an award in recognition of their support and service to students. Being able to positively support students through and beyond the university was found to be a significant motivator and source of fulfillment for these university staff. These individuals described going above and beyond to make themselves available, listening and proactively responding to student needs, and demonstrating genuine honesty and empathy. Staff were also seen to leverage their networks to connect students to resources and opportunities more effectively.

However, the support provided to students extended beyond connecting them to resources as needed. Some staff shared the ways in which they intentionally empower the

students they work with to build their confidence, improve their self-advocacy skills, and encourage students to recognize their own strengths and power to address personal, institutional, and greater societal issues and injustices. These exemplary staff believed in the power and potential of their students and nurtured that in their various interactions, helping students to not only better navigate the university, but prepare them for success beyond graduation.

To understand the student-staff relationship more comprehensively, it was important to also elicit the student perspective of these positive relationships with staff and identify the ways in which students have been supported by staff and the impact on their experiences. As seen in *Chapter 4*, interviews with students who had formed relationships with campus staff reveal the profound impact that even incidental encounters with professional university staff can have. Students shared how their relationships with staff helped them to grow, improved their sense of belonging and confidence on campus, enabled them to support others, and in some cases, prevented them from leaving or withdrawing from the university. While some students met staff through formal programs, such as a course that pairs staff mentors with students, or met unexpectedly through a book club, students acknowledged the various ways that staff have supported them and the value of those relationships in their experience.

In its entirety, this dissertation research serves as an opportunity to highlight and recognize the role that professional staff play in higher education in regard to the support of students. Prior research has shown that the relationships that students form on campus with faculty and staff play a role in their persistence within the university (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). However, the research on these relationships tends to focus on faculty and

academics, rather than professional staff. By explicitly focusing on professional staff, this dissertation aims to address that gap. Moving beyond their operational impact within the institution, my hope is that this work can illustrate the relational impact that staff can have on students and expand our understanding of *who* plays a role in college student success.

Recognizing my own professional experiences and positioning, this is a topic that is deeply important to me. By acknowledging the ways that university staff contribute to positive student outcomes outside of the classroom, we can begin to consider the ways in which staff themselves are supported within the university. Through this work, I aim to not only spotlight the critical work that professional staff do, but also interrogate the ways that the institution may inhibit their potential. In doing so, we can better advocate for more sustainable staff expectations and support structures in higher education. Findings from these three studies inform both individual and institutional recommendations to maximize the supportive capability of professional staff in an effort to better support students and the entire campus community.

Study themes

Characterizing professional staff

Considered together, the three studies included in the preceding chapters provide a unique glimpse into what it looks like for professional staff to positively support students. By analyzing these relationships from both the staff and student perspective, we can uncover similarities and outline what it really means to be a supportive campus agent. Moving beyond theory into practice, this dissertation expands upon the limited existing

research exploring student-staff relationships to paint a fuller picture of what staff support can look like and what potential impact it may have.

What is evident from the included studies is that positive support from campus staff is firmly rooted in genuine empathy and care for students. In *Chapter 3* it was seen how invested staff are in positive student outcomes, including staying connected with them beyond graduation. Staff valued their relationships with students and wanted them to grow and be successful in all aspects of their lives. This care emerged in multiple forms, including checking in with students, assisting them after-hours, providing honest feedback, self-disclosing, helping with professional skills, and staying connected with students long after graduation. Despite a profound sense of humility from most staff and an unwillingness to consider their work as "above and beyond," staff shared examples of them going beyond what might be expected of a typical staff member to assist students in a moment in need—and it was because they genuinely wanted them to be successful.

Care for students is at the crux of working with university students, but demonstrating empathy was not only a top characteristic shared by staff participants, but also students as seen in *Chapter 4*. Being able to recognize student challenges and being empathetic to their unique needs was a common theme for both groups. In many cases, this empathy is rooted in the staff member's own identity or experiences. Staff shared how their own experiences as first-generation college students, children of immigrants, or as openly gay helped to shape their perceptions and acknowledge the unique struggles faced by marginalized students. Students also acknowledged how a shared identity can be beneficial in forming a more trusting, open relationship with staff, which reflects previous research that includes university staff (Luedke, 2017; McCallen & Johnson,

2020; Museus & Neville, 2012). Having a shared identity is not required in order to be empathetic to students, but it may certainly assist with certain groups and allow for the formation of a deeper connection. For those who are not able to connect over a shared identity, approaching student relationships with an informed understanding of what marginalized students may need and an equity mindset can be a powerful aid as discussed later in this chapter.

While staff may be able to improve *how* they demonstrate genuine care and empathy for students, these are qualities that are likely innate within staff who are drawn to university work. However, some common behaviors emerge from these three studies that help to identify practices that are both valued by students and utilized by successfully supportive campus staff members. The first is a willingness to make themselves available to students. While in many cases this included sharing personal contact information or meeting with students outside of standard working hours, staff were also able to make themselves available within the boundaries of their role. In *Chapter 2*, student-supervising staff described making themselves available regularly to check in with students and hear about their lives or address issues. Staff in *Chapter 3* described holding open hours that are dedicated to student conversations. For some students in *Chapter 4*, even just being told by staff that they were available for any and all issues was important enough on its own, even if students did not actually reach out. Considered alongside the disconnect that students described feeling in the third study, an effort on behalf of staff to proactively make themselves accessible and available to students can be seen to be a defining feature of providing effective student support.

A second, powerful action that supportive staff implemented within these studies was connecting students to both resources and opportunities. By leveraging their networks both on and off-campus, staff were able to help students get access to more specialized forms of support. This includes connecting students in crisis to appropriate support services, getting students in contact with staff members across campus, and sharing job opportunities. From helping students to network professionally to personally vetting contacts across various departments, staff recognized their ability to direct and connect students. In *Chapter 4,* some students shared how staff knew where to go in order to get whatever was needed and one even remarked that she was more quickly able to access important campus resources when she was referred directly by her staff mentor.

Staff in *Chapters 2* and *3* recognized how their connections could benefit students, while students in *Chapter 4* shared how beneficial those connections were in their academic, professional, and personal success. Previous research that has elicited the student perspective on staff and faculty support reflects the value that those connections can have for students, and in particular, first-generation college students and students of color (McCallen & Johnson, 2020; Museus & Neville, 2012). Through these campus staff, students are afforded access to an expanded network of support, demonstrating the value of these relationships for college students. In this way, we can see how a framework that emphasizes these network relationships, such as that put forward by Stanton-Salazar (1997; 2011), is a useful lens to consider the ways in which professional staff serve and support students beyond their operational contributions to the university.

Positioning staff as institutional and empowerment agents

Utilizing a social capital framework (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; 2011), this dissertation provides a conceptualization of how professional staff in higher education can leverage their campus knowledge and networks to support students. School sites, including universities, can (re)produce and legitimize social inequities through institutional valuation of capital that is already valued beyond campus borders (Berger, 2000; Bourdieu, 1973). For students with disadvantaged access to those resources, such as first-generation college students or students of color, navigating the university can be challenging as they try to gain access to important resources. Stanton-Salazar (1997; 2011) presents a socialization framework in which *institutional agents* can support and empower students by directly sharing valuable resources in the form of social capital.

Embedded and well-connected within the institution, these individuals can make the difference for marginalized students for whom "attempts at help-seeking and network development within mainstream spheres usually occur within the context of differential power relations and within social contexts that are culturally different from, if not alienating to, cultural outsiders" (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984 *in* Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 4). Considering the ways in which university staff within the included studies connect and direct students to important resources or individuals to support their success and well-being, this dissertation demonstrates the significance of student-staff relationships when professional staff act on their capacity to serve as an *institutional agent*.

An *institutional agent* is defined as an "individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status and authority. . . [and] acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources" (Stanton-Salazar,

2011, p. 1067). In *Chapter 2* we saw visitor services professionals who were deeply motivated by their ability to widen higher education pathways for underrepresented minority students and/or first-generation college students through the sharing of important university and admission knowledge. In *Chapter 3* we saw examples of staff across a variety of roles who connected students to resources by sharing important information and resources regularly with students, directly linking students to other campus offices or staff, or using their professional networks to bridge students to career development opportunities. Through these relationships, students were able to gain access to valuable resources and in *Chapter 4*, students described how their relationships with staff supervisors and/or mentors enabled them to persist and succeed within the university as a result.

Within this framework, the capability for an individual to act as an effective institutional agent is dependent on the structure and quality of their institutional network. Individuals with larger and more diverse networks of "agents who can be called upon to assist with challenging issues" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1094) are more likely to effectively support students. In *Chapter 3*, staff participants had on average 14 years of experience working within that university. That experience allowed staff to build stronger and wider networks, with some noting that they have contacts in every major resource office on campus. For some, the pandemic presented a unique opportunity to build and strengthen those networks. Combined with the "systemic knowledge, the intellectual capital" (Graham, 2012, p. 439) that professional staff possess, professional staff are well-positioned to act as institutional agents, despite their absence in the research on socialization of college students. In addition, as argued later, staff who are of color and/or

were first-generation students would be well positioned to strengthen networks with other staff.

While this form of institutional support is valuable and was a common theme within the three included studies, Stanton-Salazar (2011) encourages us to look beyond just the provision of institutional resources to the authentic empowerment of students. *Empowerment agents* are aware of social and structural inequities, recognize the need for institutional support for marginalized students, and are willing to go against institutional rules and norms to advocate on behalf of students. In doing so, these *empowerment agents* mobilize not only students to take control of their lives, but to radically change oppressive systems (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). This distinction is critical in recognizing how university staff, as *institutional agents*, can go beyond helping students individually to move through the university, but enable them to "confront and contest oppressive institutional practices. . . work to solve community problems. . . [and] organize and perform complex organizational tasks" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1093).

Given the requirement that *empowerment agents* actively work alongside students and counter to institutional norms, individuals acting as empowerment agents are rare (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). This is reflected in the research that applies this framework in higher education. For example, in a study of college students who successfully transferred from community college to four-year universities, Dowd et al. (2013) found that the institutional agents referenced did not attempt to change any social structures and instead solely acted as connectors to resources. However, in a study of senior-level administrators at Hispanic Serving Institutions, Garcia and Ramirez (2018) did identify some characteristics among these leaders that reflect a motivation to act as *empowerment*

agents. Particularly within *Chapters 3* and *4* of this dissertation, we can not only see the potential for professional staff to act as *empowerment agents*, but examples of them doing so. In *Chapter 3* we saw Thomas encouraging student leaders to be informed activists, even volunteering to protest alongside them. Lydia, who described seeing how limiting and unjust university policy was regarding support for undocumented students, shared how she works alongside student organization leaders to demand changes from the university. Additionally, as a senior-level administrator, she has reframed how she interprets policy to open up the potential for what *can* be done versus interpreting it at face value. Jenna, in her efforts to build a supportive network for her scholarship students, explicitly described how she has built a network of individuals who are knowledgeable and willing to meet the unique needs of her students. In all three of these cases, we see staff who are willing to advocate on behalf of students and be identified as such by the larger campus community, a key characteristic of *empowerment agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). From this perspective, we see examples of professional staff recognizing and reinforcing the power of students to make meaningful change.

Student participants in *Chapter 4* shared how their relationships with campus staff not only enabled them to be better connected across campus but improved their self-confidence and awareness of how to effectively navigate campus. Further, students shared how the information and advice given to them allowed them to then support their peers in a variety of contexts and situations. In this way, we can also begin to see alternative forms of empowerment that extend beyond the individual student. Students who may be struggling with imposter syndrome within the university may be able to better recognize their strengths and value on campus through their relationships with

professional staff, contributing to an improved capacity to act as an advocate both for themselves and their peers. Students can then carry these new skills and self-confidence as they navigate the university and beyond, further transmitting these resources beyond campus borders.

This socialization framework for the support and empowerment of students is one that while typically applied in the K-12 context, fits well within higher education. In particular, utilizing this framework allows us to include professional staff in the consideration of student support and envision they ways in which they can positively impact college students by providing an "educational experience that is strategic, empowering, and network-enhancing" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 4). Staff who are aware of institutional and societal inequities can utilize their positions and networks on campus to not only individually support students as they navigate the university, but empower them, along with other campus agents to make meaningful change. Through findings from this dissertation, we can expand our understanding of who is well-situated in the university context to act as *an institutional agent* and what empowerment of students looks like in action.

Influences of supportive student-staff relationships

Importantly, this dissertation not only presents examples of how staff can support and empower students, but also the impact that those relationships have on a student's college experience. *Chapters 2* and *3* present examples of how university staff support their students and the behaviors or practices that they implement in their relationships with students. However, in *Chapter 4* we got to see what these relationships meant to students and how staff influenced their college experience. Findings revealed that

supportive staff members had a direct impact on students, including supporting their growth and development, improving their self-confidence and empowering them, helping them to problem-solve and navigate crises, and importantly, encouraged them to persist within the university. While staff are recognized for their operational contributions to the university (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018; Graham, 2012), we begin to see the ways in which their informal relationships with students have a direct impact on their experience, persistence, and retention, which has largely been overlooked in prior research (Graham & Regan, 2016).

Staff frequently cited an investment in the growth and development of the students they worked with, and students in *Chapter 4* acknowledged how their relationships with campus staff helped them to grow both personally and professionally. Students described how staff helped them to develop professional skills and actively connected them with new opportunities for professional development. Additionally, staff gave students the opportunity to take on leadership roles and make decisions which helped them to learn value problem-solving skills and gave them a sense of autonomy in their tasks. Finally, staff provided students with honest feedback, giving students the space to make mistakes without fear of repercussions and opportunity to learn from them with guidance and support.

These relationships also led to an improved sense of confidence and belonging on campus. Staff helped students to overcome feelings of imposter syndrome and find their voice, as well as their confidence to use it. By believing in students and communicating that to them, staff helped students to feel more empowered on campus and capable of tackling new challenges. In situations where students were faced with crises, staff

supported them along the way, encouraged them to think critically, and importantly, allowed them to make decisions for themselves. By doing so, students were not only able to feel more knowledgeable about the resources available to them, but more confident in advocating for themselves and overcoming obstacles in the future.

Finally, some students shared how their relationship with a campus staff member was integral in them continuing to pursue their education when they considered dropping out or taking time off. Whether it was a staff mentor who connected them to critical resources, such as emergency funding or housing, or their staff supervisor who encouraged them and believed in their abilities, staff supported students through challenging moments and gave them the advice and tools to continue pursuing their education. In this way, we can see how having a staff member who believes in them and wants them to succeed can make all of the difference in the life and educational success of a student. Not only does this positively benefit the student, but as seen in earlier chapters of this dissertation, the ability to influence positive student outcomes is a key motivator for university staff.

Recommendations for practice

Individual recommendations for professional staff in higher education

Findings from the studies included within this dissertation inform recommendations at both the individual and institutional level to maximize the potential for professional staff to build positive relationships with students and enhance the student experience. On the individual level, this dissertation builds upon prior research and informs practices that professional staff can utilize to support and empower students at their institution more effectively.

Recommendation #1: Proactive outreach to students

Reflecting prior literature, findings from this dissertation reinforce the need for professional staff to *proactively* make themselves available. Students perceived a disconnect between students and university staff and described a sense of intimidation in approaching staff (*Chapter 4*). Low-income and first-generation college students in particular may feel that staff are unapproachable, and students may not want to initiate interactions with staff or bring forward their current challenges (Bassett, 2021). Specifically in the context of the return to in-person university operations after nearly two years of remote learning, students are eager to connect with staff face-to-face. This indicates that professional staff should make the effort to be not only visible, but accessible, to students who are seeking support to prevent the responsibility for initiating student-staff interaction falling solely on the students themselves. As Rendón, Jalomo, Nora (2000) note, staff who "have not focused on active outreach to students. . . [may] also assume that all students, regardless of background, are ready, willing, and able to get involved" (p. 145). For working-class students, or those less familiar with navigating the university environment, knowing who to reach out, when, and how to do so may be a significant barrier to receiving the necessary support.

Recommendation #2: Foster trusting relationships

In addition to providing intentional outreach to students, staff can help to foster positive student-staff relationships by building a welcoming, inclusive, and safe space for students (Dowd et al., 2013; Roberts, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2011). Students in *Chapter 4* described how impactful staff members made it known that they were accessible at any time and students could bring forward a variety of issues. Many of the exemplary staff in

Chapter 3 demonstrated this openness by sharing personal contact information or holding open hours for students to meet with them in a more casual setting.

This sort of accessibility also helps to establish and build trust between staff and students. Considered alongside comments from students in *Chapter 4* that reflect an "us versus them" mentality between students and staff, building trust is critical in being able to form supportive relationships (Luedke, 2017; Museus & Neville, 2012). Stanton-Salazar (1997) also emphasizes the importance of trusting relationships between students and institutional agents, stating that trust "cannot be underestimated, since it represents a root cause for why the former disengage (psychically or physically) from the school" (p. 17). In some cases, staff can help to build trust based on their own identity and background, allowing them to directly connect to a student's experience. In other cases, staff can practice varying levels of self-disclosure to establish transparency in their relationships with students, as was seen with Greg who shared about his own grief to better support his students. At its foundation, staff can help to establish trusting relationships by listening to student needs, demonstrating empathy, being willing to help connect students as needed or guide them in problem-solving behaviors, and maintaining confidentiality.

Recommendation #3: Acknowledge students' capital and strengths

Professional university staff will also benefit from an asset or strengths-based approach in their work with students. For students of color attending a predominantly white institution (PWI), "acknowledging, not avoiding, their background characteristics and how this contributed to their college experiences" (Luedke, 2017, p. 49) was integral in forming supportive relationships with staff mentors. In *Chapter 3*, Julie, who works

closely with first-generation students, described how she ascribes to an assets-based approach and works to help students identify the skills and tools they already possess so that they can make the best decisions for themselves. This requires the establishment of *counterspaces* where "deficit perspectives can be negated and where students' experiences are validated and acknowledged" (Luedke, 2017, p. 50; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). While it is important for staff to use a strengths-based approach with their students, it is important that universities aim to foster this culture more broadly across campus as discussed below. As seen in *Chapter 2,* staff were motivated to pursue their careers in higher education based on the positive and affirming experiences they had themselves as student employees. The recognition and validation of students' unique cultural capital can positively influence their career trajectory and ultimately contribute to a more diverse and supportive campus community.

Recommendation #4: Build & mobilize an institutional network

To act effectively as an *institutional agent*, professional staff need to have an extended network to which they can refer students. Findings from these dissertation studies and the utilization of Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital framework demonstrate that a staff member's ability to successfully support students is reliant on being able to refer them to other resources and individuals to address a variety of needs. Whether it is connecting students to appropriate mental health care services, or sharing job opportunities, professional staff are well-connected on campus and students recognize them as such (Chapter 4). To help facilitate the construction of a large and diverse network, staff should make efforts to connect with a variety of campus partners, including other staff and faculty (Museus & Neville, 2012). Many staff in *Chapter 3*

remarked that staff often work in isolation and effective cross-functional communication does not always happen. While the institution itself plays a significant role in building better campus partnerships, individuals can help to establish and grow their own personal networks by intentionally reaching out to meet and work with individuals in various roles across campus and identifying what resources they can provide to students. Stanton-Salazar (2011) defines this initiative to build a network of support as an "enlightened network orientation" (p. 1094) that is critical in providing institutional support.

Building one's network is integral in maximizing their potential to act on behalf of students as an *institutional agent,* however, it is important that this network include individuals who are also prepared to assume the role of institutional or empowerment agent (Dulworth, 2008). Jenna provides an example of how this can look in practice, by actively connecting with key stakeholders to identify individuals who are aware of the unique needs of her scholarship students and are willing to do what it takes to assist them. Doing so not only leads a supportive network in which students can have access to as they navigate the university, but a network that supports their authentic empowerment and works towards transforming the institution itself (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Institutional recommendations for universities

The included studies present a variety of behaviors and practices that professional staff can implement in their work with students to help build positive, supportive relationships. These relationships assist in preparing students for the skills they will need to succeed both within, and beyond the university, and staff should actively aim to support the personal and professional development of students. However, it is important that we do not absolve the role of the university in the support of students and recognize

the ways in which professional staff may perceive themselves to be limited in the support they can give students within the institution. In illuminating the important role that professional staff can play in the well-being and success of college students, through this dissertation I aim to advocate for professional staff and critically examine the ways in which the university setting presents institutional barriers for this group. Personal motivations and actions can go a long way in the support of students. However, we must also look at the ways in which universities may not provide the resources necessary for staff to support students fully. By adding to our understanding of the impact that professional staff can have on students directly, this group is positioned as important and worthy of advocacy in an effort to improve their professional experience. In doing so, we can also improve the experience of the students they work with. We must grapple with the link between university staff across all levels and roles and the student experience, and if the institution's goal is to support the success and retention of their students, they must also actively support the success and retention of their professional staff.

Recommendation #1: Strengthen campus partnerships and collaboration

Echoing calls from previous research, it is imperative that universities make intentional efforts to bridge campus staff and faculty to one another and foster cross-campus collaboration and communication (Graham, 2012; Graham & Regan, 2016; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). As multiple staff in *Chapter 3* lamented, they felt at their institution that staff work in silos, often isolated from one another. While staff across departments and roles may specialize in certain forms of support, it is important that communication between staff be streamlined. As Tara noted, the lack of campus communication results in students often being "ping-ponged" across campus when they

need support. By creating better flowing communication channels, staff can more efficiently connect students to the services they need. This communication also applies to top-down communication that moves from campus leadership to staff. In *Chapters 2* and *3*, staff members shared that communication from senior leadership was often slow to come and lacked direction. Particularly in the context of the pandemic, critical decisions and information around university operations during the transitions to and from remote work led to a lack of clarity for staff. This lack of timely and clear communication then trickles down to students, as staff are often the front line for students seeking information.

Improving cross-campus communication is key, however, it must also be coupled with improved campus-wide partnership. This requires professional staff across departments to not only collaborate with one another, but to improve collaboration between professional and academic staff, including faculty. Graham and Regan (2016) call for a *pedagogical partnership*, in which successful student outcomes are "achieved by all higher education staff, working in a collegial and collaborative way, with the student as a co-contributor to that outcome" (p. 605). Relationships between faculty and professional staff can be contentious (Graham, 2012), with faculty not perceiving staff contributions as educational (Graham & Regan, 2016) or that professional staff are imposing on faculty autonomy and taking over leadership roles (Szekeres, 2004). The roles of staff and faculty are undoubtedly different, but professional staff contribute to the learning that happens outside of the classroom.

As seen in this dissertation, professional staff provide valuable forms of support to students that promote their educational persistence in the classroom. In the context of a research university such as that in *Chapters 3* and *4*, staff are an important piece of

student development and retention when faculty have both teaching and research obligations which may limit the time they are able to spend with students (Milem et al., 2000). Although, this is not an issue reserved for research universities. Palmer and Gasman (2008) shared a similar sentiment when looking at how social capital is shared with students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) by both professional staff and faculty. Given the variety of individuals that students identified as integral in their support, they acknowledge that "success in college does not lie in the hand of any one person; rather, the entire university community is responsible for deploying social capital in a way that promotes student persistence and retention" (Palmer & Gasman, 2008, p. 67). Considered in the context of the growing proportion of professional staff across universities nationwide **(**Bossu & Brown, 2018) and the corporatization of higher education (Szekeres, 2004), "universities will have to nurture and use the potential of all their staff in order to be able to deliver quality education and research. Academic and professional staff will all need to work together collaboratively and co-operatively" (Graham, 2012, p. 448). To do so, universities will need to implement structural opportunities for professional and academic staff to work together, in addition to communicating the value of the contributions of both groups to support a partnership towards the common goal of student education and success.

Recommendation #2: Building a culture of equity & improving staff diversity

When it comes to the support of students of color specifically, it is paramount that intentional efforts be made to improve staffing diversity within both faculty and professional staff roles. This has been well-substantiated in the literature (Dayton et al, 2004; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018; Luedke, 2017; Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019; McCallen

& Johnson, 2020; Museus & Neville, 2012; Schreiner et al., 2011; Trolian & Parker, 2017). In *Chapter 2* we saw how the identity of staff influenced their motivations in their work, such as Gabriel who is deeply committed to improving college access for Black and Latino/a youth. Similarly, in *Chapters 3* and *4* we saw the role of identity in staff member's approach to their work and the importance of shared identity in building positive relationships with students.

However, it is important that we think beyond the important step of increasing diversity in staffing and more broadly toward building a more equitable institution as "cultural commonalities between individual agents and youth and thus, the potential for forging trusting relationships and solidarity, may be undermined if the greater institutional context sends multiple signals of its deep investment in society's status quo" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1088). However, as Kuh and Love (2000) note:

> virtually all colleges and universities espouse a commitment to diversifying their student bodies, faculty, and curricula. Yet an underlying assumption persists that those from cultural backgrounds different from that of the institution's dominant culture need to adapt to the institution. (p. 209)

Universities must establish a ubiquitous culture of equity that recognizes and values various forms of cultural capital that students bring with them to the university (Yosso, 2005). Moving away from a deficit perspective, universities that are genuinely invested in improving the outcomes for all of their students and addressing societal inequities must assume that "students are valuable resources to themselves and their families, communities, and society" (Tierney, 2000, p. 223). In doing so, universities can establish institutional norms that reinforce the expectation that staff and faculty value

students from all backgrounds and create a space where students can utilize their existing capital to thrive (Luedke, 2017). This shift in institutional culture cannot be accomplished on individual goodwill alone and requires significant effort on the part of university leadership to steer the culture in this direction. But without this institutional commitment, individuals who ascribe to a deficit-perspective, or are not invested in improving the educational experiences of marginalized students, will remain within the university at the detriment of the students they serve.

> Entrenched knowledge and beliefs are hard to notice, and they are not likely to be changed by attending a short-term workshop or by participating in professional development activities on such topics as intercultural communication or culturally responsive teaching. Nor is entrenched knowledge likely to be given up by reading the results reported in research reports. Moreover, entrenched knowledge that predisposes practitioners to judge unequal outcomes as student deficiencies is resistant to change because it is reinforced by academic norms, the culture of individualism and self-determination, and discipline-based conceptions about teaching and learning. (Bensimon, 2007, p. 460)

Recommendation #3: Supporting and retaining professional staff

Through the included studies in this dissertation, we can begin to see the positive impacts that supportive staff interactions and relationships can have on student outcomes. When we look at student-staff relationships at their best, we can see that supportive staff are those who are willing to go above and beyond for students, have a large and diverse network to which they can refer students, and feel motivated by the knowledge that their work has a positive impact on students. Prior research has shown that the latter is a key

factor in university staff's sense of job satisfaction (Graham & Regan, 2016). However, we must acknowledge the ways in working within the institution itself can make it challenging for professional staff to support students at their fullest capacity.

At the core, it is important that staff feel valued at their institution and one way this can be communicated is by the compensation that staff receive directly through their salaries and indirectly through the resources that are allocated to staff needs on campus (Marshall et al., 2016). Professional staff in *Chapters 2* and *3* commented on the lack of competitive wages which has been a common factor within previous research on staff attrition, particularly within student affairs roles (Marshall et al., 2016). The issue of salary compensation continues to be a pressing issue, with a recent report of student affairs professionals nationwide finding that nearly nine in ten respondents said their salary was not sufficient when compared to the requirements needed to get a job within their field (NASPA, 2022). While financial compensation was not found to be a motivator for professional university staff in *Chapters 2* and *3*, it is critical that staff are fairly compensated for their work and that universities offer competitive wages to attract qualified employees.

As seen in *Chapters 3* and *4*, we saw that a willingness to go above and beyond for students when needed was important in providing student support, however, staff in *Chapter 3* noted that it is an unspoken expectation go above and beyond, including working late hours. When considered alongside compensation levels, it is important that we grapple with this expectation of staff to go above and beyond and work long hours. This has been addressed in the realm of student affairs work, with some staff regularly working 80-hour work weeks or always being on-call (NASPA, 2022; Sallee, 2020). In

Chapter 2, staff who were experiencing increased workloads and additional responsibilities in the return to in-person work were feeling overwhelmed, with some even having intentions to leave. These expectations are communicated, whether explicitly or more subconsciously, at the institutional level and the university plays a large role in setting more sustainable working expectations (Isdell & Wolf-Wendel, 2020).

In thinking about work stress for university staff, it also moves beyond the workload itself, but the nature of the work being done. Throughout this dissertation, staff participants shared examples of severe student crises that they were faced with, including homelessness, addiction, and mental health crises. In the context of the pandemic, taking care of students needs along with their own was taxing for professional staff who supervise students as reflected in *Chapter 2*. Prior research has shown that "emotional labor and care work are not only undervalued but also result in additional stressors that make balance more difficult and impede on time and energy" (Graglia et al., 2020, p. 129), making other work tasks difficult to accomplish. Ultimately, this contributes to work stress and can negatively impact staff's work experience and their intentions to stay. The institution should therefore communicate to staff more sustainable working expectations and not ask staff to sacrifice personally in order to get the work done (Sallee, 2020). Additionally, training that specifically addresses student support would be valuable for staff, as many work closely with students and must navigate student crises and act as decoders for students (previously described), without formal training in this respect. Aligning with the earlier recommendation for improved campus collaboration, staff-led trainings could be invaluable in aiding professionals who work directly with students and tools they can utilize in challenging moments. Staff who are first generation

and/or persons of color would be highly valuable in providing this training for the broader population. Such mentoring in higher education positions would also seem a strong force for diversifying professional staff.

One direct way that universities could ensure that the workload and expectations for staff are more sustainable is to improve staffing levels. Many of the participants in both *Chapters 2* and *3* reported insufficient staffing levels. While the number of professional staff across the nation has been growing (Bossu & Brown, 2018; Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014), we are currently in the midst of what has been referred to as the "Great Resignation" (Thompson, 2021), leaving many universities understaffed (*see Chapter 1).* Further, throughout the pandemic, it is estimated that over 550,000 higher education jobs have been lost, some voluntarily and others not, with staff of color and those in lower-paid positions disproportionately affected (Bauman, 2021). To add to the loss, many staff are choosing to move universities or leave higher education entirely (Ellis, 2021). Attracting qualified staff is going to be more challenging and will require intentional efforts on behalf of the university. Additionally, retaining these staff will likely require better compensation or benefits and improved flexibility, often cited as a primary reason for leaving university work (Sallee, 2020; Ellis, 2021).

Retention is an issue that impacts staff as well as students. Investing in staff retention is not only financially beneficial for universities in turnover costs savings, but retaining staff allows them to become more deeply invested and knowledgeable within the university. Unfortunately, professional staff retention has often been overlooked (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007; Graham, 2013). Returning to the social capital framework presented earlier, staff will not be able to build strong and diverse networks if the rates of

attrition are too high as staff departure leaves gaps in potential social networks for both students and other potential institutional agents. As seen in *Chapter 3*, staff who had longer careers within the university had stronger connections on campus and were more knowledgeable of university processes and policies, improving their ability to more effectively support students. Failing to retain staff will ultimately harm students as staff will not have the institutional depth of knowledge to support them fully. Universities cannot fully commit to the support and retention of students without also being committed to the support and retention of their professional staff. The studies included within this dissertation help to convey the important role and impact that professional staff have, with the hope that findings can help to garner institutional buy-in and support for staff. There was some indication that one stressor for staff is that administration might not fully acknowledge the labor staff expend in assisting students. This raises the question, how do we mitigate stress, not just by providing resources, but encouraging administration to buy into the notion that supervising students is central to the work of staff?

Limitations and directions for future research

Findings from this dissertation present promising directions in which to further our understandings of student-staff relationships in higher education and their role in positive student outcomes. While *Chapters 3* and *4* give more insight into the potential of student-staff relationships, future research would benefit from including additional institutions and types to identify commonalities, as findings from these studies are only applicable in the context of the university in which the research was conducted. Additionally, while these two chapters provide a look into what student-staff

relationships can offer at their best, understanding why students do *not* form positive relationships with staff would allow us to uncover potential barriers in the formation of these relationships. Participants in *Chapter 4* were limited to students who had formed positive relationships with at least one professional staff member, but including those who had not yet done so, or potentially had negative experiences with professional staff, would help to more fully understand what can be done at both the individual and institutional level to foster these connections.

Through utilization of the social capital framework presented by Stanton-Salazar (1997; 2011), attention was paid to the relationships that underrepresented minority and first-generation college students had with university staff. Within these relationships we saw the role that identity played, both for professional staff in their approach to work, and for students in their level of comfort and trust with staff. While students and staff of color were not the exclusive focus of these studies, future research would benefit from exploring these relationships in more depth, similar to Luedke's (2017) study of how staff of color supported students of color and were able to nurture their cultural capital in ways that white staff were not able to within a Predominantly White Institution (PWI).

Due to the timing of the studies within this dissertation, the COVID-19 pandemic was a key contextual factor underlying study findings. For example, in *Chapter 2,* the pandemic created new stressors for visitor services staff, as well as exacerbated existing ones. In *Chapter 4*, the pandemic prevented students from being able to connect with professional staff in the same way and many expressed a desire to connect face-to-face. It cannot be ignored how the pandemic underpins much of this dissertation, whether or not that was the original intention. To better understand student-staff relationships in higher

education, continued research over a longer period of time may help to uncover findings that are more reflective of standard university operations and determine what may be anomalous to the pandemic.

Finally, this dissertation aims to represent why it is important that we consider professional staff when looking at student support and outcomes in higher education. The scholars who have been calling for the inclusion of professional staff (Bensimon, 2007; Graham, 2012; Graham & Regan, 2016; Luedke, 2017) are often practitioners themselves. My hope is that this dissertation illustrates the important contributions of this group. Bensimon (2007) acknowledges this gap and addresses the "lack of scholarly and practical attention toward understanding how the practitioner— her knowledge, beliefs, experiences, education, sense of self-efficacy, etc.—affects how students experience their education" (p. 444). While attention has been paid to the work of those who fulfill student affairs-related roles, it is important that we consider staff from a variety of roles across campus, including those that might not provide traditional or formal student support. Even informal interactions or supervisory relationships are ripe for potential in positively impacting students. This is not to argue that we should not continue to explore the role that faculty play in the direct and indirect education and support of students, but it is time that we consider all actors within the university setting and acknowledge the contributions of professional staff in supporting student growth, well-being, and success.

Conclusion

This multi-study dissertation presents an exploration of staff contributions to positive student outcomes in higher education. By exploring what supportive student-staff relationships can look like in practice, as well as their impact on the workplace

experiences of professional staff, we can more fully understand the role that staff play within the campus community beyond their operational contributions. Doing so enables us to position staff as *institutional agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and envision what student support and empowerment can look like at their best. Identifying how staff can maximize and act upon their capacity gives us an ideal that we can work towards, while also recognizing the institutional limitations that inhibit the formation of positive student-staff relationships. Findings from this dissertation reflect the importance of the inclusion of professional staff in the research on the college student experience and demonstrate a need for an institutional investment in staff, including improved campus-wide partnerships and collaboration and compensation to more fully support and empower students.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide (Chapter 2)

Role Responsibilities

1. What is your official job title? Who is your position and visitor program under in the organization structure?
2. How long have you been in your role? How long have you worked in higher education?
    a. Probe: additional background within higher education settings
3. What are the primary responsibilities of your position?
    a. Probe: Student supervisory responsibilities

Motivation

4. What led you to this type of work?
5. What would you say keeps you motivated or engaged in the work that you do?
6. Can you describe a specific situation at work that was a positive or motivating experience for you?
    a. Probe: Who was involved?
    b. Probe: Why did that situation feel positive or motivating?
    c. Probe: How often do similar situations occur in your work?
7. What sorts of things could be done, if anything, to further motivate you in your role?
8. Is there anything further you would like to share as it relates to your motivation in this position?

Stress

9. When you think of the term "work stress", what does that mean to you?
10. How often would you say you experience stress related to your work?
    a. Probe: Do you find that there are predictable times where you can anticipate greater or lesser amounts of stress?
11. Can you describe a specific situation at work that you would define as “stressful”? (2x)
    a. Probe: What about the situation made it stressful?
    b. Probe: Who was involved in that situation?
    c. Probe: How did this situation impact you at work, if at all?
    d. Probe: Did this situation impact you outside of work? If so, how?
    e. Probe: How often do similar situations like this occur in your work-life?
12. What are some of the ways in which you cope with work stress?
13. What problem-solving strategies have you used that have worked for you in stressful times?
    a. Probe: Any problem-solving strategies with student staff?

14. What kinds of support or changes to your work would help alleviate work stress for you?
15. From your experience, do you believe that your role is more or less stressful than that of your colleagues?
    a. Probe: What factors make it more/less stressful?
16. Would you say that your role has become more or less stressful over time, if it has changed at all?
17. Do external factors impact your work stress, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, economic downturn, or current social-historical contextual issues such as the current Black Lives Matter movement? How so?
    a. Probe: What resources have supported your work during these situations?
18. In the past six months, have you experienced work stress significant enough to make you consider leaving your role?
19. Is there anything further you would like to add as it relates to your experiences with stress at work?

APPENDIX B

Pre-Interview Participant Questionnaire (Chapter 3)

1. What is your participant number?

2. What is your current job title?

3. How many years have you been employed **in your current role**?

4. How many years have you been employed **at your current university/institution**?

5. Which category best describes you? *Please select all that apply.*
    a. American Indian or Alaska Native
    b. Asian
    c. Black/African American
    d. Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin
    e. Middle Eastern or North African
    f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    g. White/Caucasian
    h. Other race, ethnicity or origin *(please specify)*
    i. Prefer to not answer

6. Which gender identity best describes you?
    a. Woman
    b. Man
    c. Transgender Woman
    d. Transgender Man
    e. Gender Non-Conforming
    f. Other identity *(please specify)*
    g. Prefer to not answer

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide (Chapter 3)

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this brief interview. As a reminder, I am interested in learning more about your experiences and relationships with students at your institution. Your name won't be recorded and participation is confidential and voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions if you don't feel comfortable and you may also withdraw from the interview at any time. Is it alright if I record both the audio and video of this conversation for analysis?

1. Can you briefly describe your role and professional duties at your institution? In what ways do you work with current students?

2. In what ways does your work with students fulfill your professional purpose?

3. What impact do you believe you have on student success at your institution?

4. In thinking about your work with students, what qualities or behaviors are beneficial in building relationships with students?

5. Can you describe a time where you went above and beyond for a student?
    a. Are there ways in which you *empower* students in your work?

6. Are there ways in which you are <u>not</u> able to assist students in your full capacity? If so, are there any institutional resources or changes that could be made that would improve your ability to support students?

7. Is there anything further you would like to add as it relates to your experiences and relationships with students?

I appreciate you taking the time to participate in this interview. As part of a second study I'm conducting, I'm looking to interview current undergraduate students about their relationships with professional staff. Is there one or two students that you might recommend as a participant?

APPENDIX D

Pre-Interview Participant Questionnaire (Chapter 4)

1. What is your participant number?

2. Your current student standing
    a. Senior
    b. Junior
    c. Sophomore
    d. Freshman

3. Please indicate if any of the following student statuses apply to you.
    a. First-generation college student
    b. Non-traditional student (over the age of 24, married/in a domestic partnership, or student parent)
    c. Current or former foster youth
    d. Military veteran
    e. Other *(please specify)*
    f. None of the above

4. Your major(s):

5. Your age (in years):

6. Which category best describes you? *Please select all that apply.*
    a. American Indian or Alaska Native
    b. Asian
    c. Black/African American
    d. Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin
    e. Middle Eastern or North African
    f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    g. White/Caucasian
    h. Other race, ethnicity or origin *(please specify)*
    i. Prefer to not answer

7. Which gender identity best describes you?
    a. Woman
    b. Man
    c. Transgender Woman
    d. Transgender Man
    e. Gender Non-Conforming
    f. Other identity *(please specify)*
    g. Prefer to not answer

8. Please rate the <u>importance</u> that staff from each campus resource below have played in your overall support and success during your time at the university. *(0=N/A, I have not used, 1=Not or rarely important, 2=Seldom important, 3=Moderately important, 4=Very important, 5=Extremely important)*
    a. Academic advising
    b. Academic support services (e.g., CLAS)
    c. Administrative services (e.g., Registrar)
    d. Career Services
    e. Counseling & Psychological Services
    f. Cultural identity-based programs (e.g., MCC, cultural resource centers)
    g. Disabled Students Program
    h. Financial Aid
    i. First-generation student resources (e.g., McNair Scholars, EOP, Promise Scholars)
    j. Housing services
    k. Library services
    l. Resource Center for Sexual & Gender Diversity (RCSGD)
    m. Student health services
    n. Sports and/or recreation
    o. Veteran & military services

9. Is there a resource not listed above that has been important in your college experience? If so, please name them here:

APPENDIX E

Interview Guide (Chapter 4)

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this brief interview. As a reminder, I am interested in learning more about your experiences with professional staff at your university. For reference, professional staff includes university employees who are not directly responsible for your academic education, such as professors. Your name won't be recorded and participation is confidential and voluntary. You do not need to answer any questions if you don't feel comfortable and you can also withdraw from the interview at any time. Is it alright if I record both the audio and video of this conversation for analysis?

1. In thinking about your relationships with professional staff, can you think of a staff member on campus who has been particularly impactful during your time at the university? If so, what about them or your relationship with them has made them impactful?
    a. How were you initially connected to that person?
    b. Are there any other ways in which this person helped you?
    c. What office or department on campus do they work in?
    d. Have you been able to form similar positive relationships with other staff members?

2. Beyond what you've already described, what qualities or characteristics are most important to you when seeking support from staff members at your university?

3. What sorts of things could staff do at your university to better support students?

4. Is there anything else you'd like to add regarding your relationships to professional staff on campus?

That concludes my questions for this interview. I want to thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. I will follow-up with you via email regarding your gift card. If you have any questions in the meantime regarding this study, you are welcome to email me directly.