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LitRally Spent: Student Affairs Professionals of Color’s Well-Being, Coping Strategies & Self-Care Practices



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# LitRally Spent: Student Affairs Professionals of Color's Well-Being, Coping Strategies & Self-Care Practices

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Tiffani Fredia Garnett

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

LitRally Spent: Student Affairs Professionals of Color's
Well-Being, Coping Strategies & Self-Care Practices

by

Tiffani Fredia Garnett
Doctor of Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2023
Professor Anna J. Markowitz, Co-Chair
Professor Kristen Lee Rohanna, Co-Chair

This qualitative study examined the manifestation of work-related stressors that SAPros of Color who provide direct services and support to Students of Color working at a large, tier-one research institution experience. Additionally, this study explored participants' self-care behaviors and strategies used to cope and probed for potential institutional systems and supportive practices that either promote or inhibit their ability to care for themselves. Semi-structured interviews with 20 SAPros of Color served to center their voices, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their experiences and perspectives which were transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the researcher.

Study findings support and extend extant literature wholly focused on SAPros of Color within this research context. More specifically, this study's findings highlight the compounding impact of infrastructural dynamics (i.e., understaffing, low SAPro of Color representation, heavy

and disproportionate workload burdens, supervisor relationships, limited time) and racialized job-related stress (i.e., subjection to ‘isms, cultural taxation, supporting Students of Color in distress) on study participants’ self-care behaviors and coping practices during the workday, and ultimately their overall well-being. Collectively, these findings are important to reemphasize since workload, SAPro burnout, and attrition from the profession is strongly associated with prior student affairs retention and attrition studies (Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2006).

The dissertation of Tiffani Fredia Garnett is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2023

# DEDICATION

Terriel, my inspiration. Those who know you, knew something insightfully wise, compassionate, and honest would always follow your one-line zinger, “Ma’am!” Those who knew you, still know your sacrifice and will forever be imprinted by your indelible mark.

Nia and Maya, thank you for your unwavering support, encouragement, and patience with your mom; I love you both dearly! When your children become your cheerleader, well then, that is something truly special. And David, my chair when I could no longer stand, my fuel when I neared empty, my subtle breeze, always there to push me forward when I wanted to fall backwards – I appreciate and love you so much.

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## Key Terminology

Table 1 below lists the definition and differentiation between these terms along with other salient terms used in this study:

***Table 1***

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| **Burnout** | "Response to prolonged exposure to demanding interpersonal situations and is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment" (Maslach et al., 2001)<br><br>"State of fatigue and frustration arising from unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources leading to physical and mental exhaustion" (Guthrie et al., 2005, p. 111).<br><br>For SAPros of Color, navigating hostile campus climates, racial battle fatigue (Husband, 2016), and expectations to perform unique, diversity-oriented services not expected of White peers likely exacerbates burnout (Anderson, 2020). |
| **Compassion Fatigue** | Negative impact on an individual's emotional, physical or spiritual well-being at the "cost of caring" for others in emotional pain (Figley, 1982).<br><br>Outcome from professional work centered on absorbing information about and relieving the emotional suffering of others, hence leading to absorbing that suffering itself as well" (Figley, 1995, p. 2) |
| **Cultural Taxation** | The extra burden employees of color experience from having additional responsibilities placed upon them because of their ethno-racial background. It's the extra work that comes from being the ethnic representative on university committees, the unofficial diversity consultant, or appointed liaison between the university and ethnic communities when socio-cultural differences arise. (Padilla, 1994) |

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| **First-generation college student** | Student whose parent/guardian has not received a four-year U.S. bachelor's degree.<br>(University of California, FirstGen, n.d.) |
| **Health** | "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." (World Health Organization, 2020) |
| **Health Promotion** | "The process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health." (World Health Organization, 2016) |
| **Secondary Traumatic Stress**<br><br>**(STS)/Vicarious Trauma** | Individual's response to being exposed to another person's traumatic experiences, and can result in STS (Figley, 1995). Symptoms of STS experienced among student affairs professionals may include the following DSM-V criteria for PTSD: "negative alteration to mood or cognition, physical arousal and reactivity, emotional arousal and reactivity, avoidance, and intrusion. (McCann & Pearlman, 1990 as cited by Lynch & Glass, 2018, p. 12 as cited by Jackson- Preston et al, 2021)<br><br>"Figley (1999) describes secondary trauma as, '"...the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person"' (p. 10)." (as cited by Lynch & Glass, 2020. p. 1044) |
| **Self-Care** | Although self-care refers to the care of the self, a good deal of complexity is involved in how that care manifests and how it is contextually understood (Lee & Miller, 2013).<br><br>Further, self-care represents that act of putting one's needs first (not in a self-serving sense) by taking time out to self-reflect upon one's needs and making a conscious effort to take advantage of services and resources that foster one's health and well-being (Miller, 2016; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Sambile, 2013). |

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| **Student Affairs** | "Non-academic division within a college or university setting that aims to provide services and enhance the development of college students, outside of the classroom through any advising, counseling, management, or administrative function" (Love, 2003 as cited by Hibbler, 2020, p. 11).<br><br>"...major administrative subdivision (i.e., Vice Chancellor/Vice President for Student Affairs, within postsecondary education institutions concerned with the provision of student programs and services which complement and supplement the classroom teaching mission of these institutions" (Miller & Prince, 1976, as cited by Borg, 1991, p.6). |
| **Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF)**<br><br>**Framework** | Coined by William A. Smith (2004), RBF are the mental, emotional, and physical racism-related strains (including micro-aggressions) experienced by People of Color that can manifest as psychophysiological symptoms. Symptoms include: "psychological (e.g., frustration, anger, resentment), physiological (e.g., headaches, a pounding heart, high blood pressure), and behavioral (e.g., stereotype threat, impatience, poor school performance) responses from racism-related stressors (including micro-aggressions)" (Franklin et al., 2014).<br><br>"Fundamental to the RBF framework is the cumulative, negative effect of racial micro-aggressions or the '"everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership"' (Sue, 2010, p. 3 as cited by Smith et al., 2014)). Due to constant preparation, coping, and defending against racial micro-aggressions, people of color are often physically and emotionally drained (Smith, 2009a)" (Franklin et al., 2014) |

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| | RBF situates these race-related stressors/micro-aggressions within a "historical, sociological, and psychological context, explaining the long- and short-term effects of resisting and fighting against racialized stressors" (Smith, 2004 as cited by Franklin et al., 2014) |
| **Well-being** | A complex, multi-dimensional construct whereby individuals experience a positive psychological state which consists of more positive than negative emotions; is interconnected with life satisfaction, self-acceptance, purpose and growth, and autonomy, to enable thriving and a flourishing life (Chessman 2021 as cited for Diener, 1984; Keyes, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 141; Su et al., 2014)<br><br>Additionally, it's a positive self-report of physical (e.g., feeling very healthy and full of energy), emotional (e.g., contentment, happiness), cognitive, social, and economic welfare within domains and life satisfaction, engaging work, sense of fulfillment, and feeling good overall. (Health Related Quality of Life, n.d.). |
| **Personal well-being** | Positive self-report of physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and economic welfare; domain -specific satisfaction and life satisfaction, engaging work, and feeling good overall. (Health Related Quality of Life, n.d.) |
| **Social emotional well-being** | Social emotional health is the ability to understand and manage our emotions and to form social connections and relationships with the world around us. Strong social emotional health enables an individual to integrate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a way that supports greater health and well-being in life. (Kaiser Permanente, 2022) |
| **Wellness** | The state of living a healthy lifestyle. (Stoewen, 2015) |

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| | “Wellness is not a passive or static state but rather an ‘“active pursuit”’ that is associated with intentions, choices, and actions as we work toward an optimal state of health and well-being. Second, wellness is linked to holistic health—that is, it extends beyond physical health and incorporates many different dimensions that should work in harmony.” (Global Wellness Institute, n.d.) |

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Statement of the Problem

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of Student Affairs Professionals (SAPros) of Color at a major, tier-one research university, many of whom are responsible for an increasingly large number of Students of Color who have experienced some form of trauma and/or crisis (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2019; Frazier et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2020; Read et al., 2014). These professionals may be experiencing compassion fatigue, vicarious secondary traumatic stress, and racialized role strain coupled with a dimension of burnout referred to in the literature as racial battle fatigue (Hibbler, 2020; Husband, 2016; Quaye et al., 2020; Sambile, 2018). These professionals are more likely to have come from marginalized backgrounds or to be first generation college students (meaning a parent/guardian has not received a 4-year U.S. BA degree) than their White colleagues, and may have faced 'isms (e.g., racism, classism, sexism) or racial micro-aggressions while navigating their institutions' hostile "chilly climate" (Anderson, 2021; Hunter, 1992; Hurtado, 1992; Husband, 2016; Sambile, 2018; Solórzano et al. 2000). The latter may also be referred to as racial battle fatigue (Husband, 2016; Franklin et al. 2014). Such experiences may strengthen SAPros of Color's commitment to supporting marginalized students by improving campus life experiences.

This specific purpose of this study was to explore how of work-related stresses such as compassion fatigue, vicarious secondary trauma, indicators of racialized role strain, and burnout manifest specifically among SAPros of Color who provide direct services to Students of Color. It had a secondary goal of understanding self-care practices that may ameliorate these stressors, as well as identifying institutional mechanisms and practices that may impede or facilitate this care.

Study findings will provide SAPros of Color further insight on self-care strategies for achieving a positive state of holistic well-being while at work. Additionally, study findings will offer institutions/departments an evidence-based framework to inform workplace policies, practices, and systems to further support SAPros of Color's self-care practices and holistic well-being. Implementing these changes help improve SAPros of Color's capacity to thrive within the workplace, as well as their retention by shifting employee well-being away from an individual responsibility to a collective one. This is of particular importance considering Mullen et al.'s (2018) study on student affairs professionals found that 21% of study participants experienced moderate- to high-levels of burnout symptoms; symptoms which are positively correlated to SAPros turnover intentions and have a reciprocal relationship to job satisfaction. Mullen et al. (2018) also posits that study findings might have differed (i.e., higher) had more stressed and burned out SAPros participated in the study in contrast to SAPros who are well.

While other studies have examined influential factors on well-being (i.e., stress, work-life autonomy, job satisfaction), these too are limited and do not specifically examine overall SAPro well-being which Chessman (2021 as cited for Diener, 1984; Keyes, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 141; Sue et al., 2014) defines as a complex, multi-dimensional construct whereby individuals experience a positive psychological state which consists of more positive than negative emotions; is interconnected with life satisfaction, self-acceptance, purpose and growth, and autonomy, to enable thriving and a flourishing life. Chessman's (2021) recent study that used the Brief Inventory of Thriving (BIT) survey instrument to explore SAPros' well-being in relationship to work quality variables does however provide a baseline composite measurement for understanding SAPros' thriving capacity. Findings indicated a composite score of 40.7 out of 50 which situates SAPros' overall well-being within the 50th-75th percentile and therefore

suggests the need to improve SAPros of Color well-being in relationship to their work environment.

## Background

The emergence of student affairs departments can be traced back to the American Council on Education's seminal, 1937 report, *The Student Personnel Point of View*. This report charged institutions to provide non-academic student personnel services that support students' intellectual, emotional, physical, social, vocational, moral, economic, and aesthetic aptitudes. As a result of this report, student affairs departments today continue to incorporate a holistic view of student development whereby learning happens both inside and outside the classroom (ACE, 1937; Pritchard et al., October 2018). According to Long (2012), student affairs' professionalization - through its graduate professional programs, journals, scholarship, and professional associations - is relatively new. In 1986, the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs (CAS) identified nearly twenty-two student affairs functional program areas. Since then, the functional scope affiliated with these areas has continued to expand (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 1986). As such, SAPros serve in increasingly diverse roles and face expanded workloads as they address students' diverse issues and needs.

Operationally, student affairs divisions and departments can vary based on an institution's size, type, functional areas, and organizational placement (Long, 2012). Some SAPro roles include academic and career advising, residential life, mental health counseling, health education and health promotion, dean of students, student group advising, and under-represented and social-identity based affinity programs (i.e., students with dependents, commuter and transfer students, students living with a disability, formerly incarcerated students).

According to Schwartz and Stewart (2017), student affairs professionals have faced three workplace challenges. First, increasing student diversity means SAPros must support students with more complex needs (i.e., navigating a hostile campus climate, intergroup conflict, isolation, mental health, social welfare needs like housing and food insecurity, etc.). Second, this increase in diverse enrollment coupled with less funding and higher education costs has increased burdens on students, many of whom are pursuing additional work or are anxious about their ability to pay off loans in the future. This is a particular challenge for low-income students (a subgroup that is likely to be first-generation and/or Students of Color) who are also more likely to be connected with student affairs programs and services dedicated to supporting and retaining them. Lastly, business model pressures for greater efficiency force SAPros to take on more responsibility with minimal staff or fiscal support and reductions in direct student services/programs (Prichard & McChesney, 2018). Despite these challenges, SAPros are expected to meet students "where they are" which means providing extensive tailored support while simultaneously fulfilling an array of diverse roles and responsibilities on top of managing complex personal (i.e., health, caregiving, long drive commute) and professional needs (i.e., career growth, demanding workload) and challenges (i.e., low salary), that they likely also face.

SAPros of Color experience the additional challenge of a cultural taxation exacerbated by the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) endured when supporting students with shared marginalized identities (Luedke, 2017). Amado Padilla (1994) describes cultural taxation as the extra burden employees of color experience from having additional responsibilities placed upon them because of their ethno-racial backgrounds. It's the extra work that comes from being the ethnic representative on university committees, the unofficial diversity consultant, or appointed liaison between the university and ethnic communities when socio-cultural differences arise.

Additionally, it is the harmful tax to SAPros of Color's well-being that arises from advising and mentoring larger numbers of Students of Color, in part due to a sense of "cultural obligation," which their White counterparts do not experience.

Although the university benefits tremendously from their presence, SAPros of Color are not compensated for these additional tasks which creates heightened work-related stress for them. Further, they may also experience compassion fatigue, vicarious secondary traumatic stress (STS), and burnout as they prioritize students' needs above their own (Altmaier, 2020; Lynch & Glass, 2018; Quaye et al., 2020, Sambile, 2018). Compassion fatigue is the negative impact on an individual's emotional, physical, or spiritual well-being at the "cost of caring" for others in emotional pain (Figley, 1995). It is the act of absorbing information about and relieving the emotional suffering of others, hence leading to "absorbing that suffering itself as well" (Figley, 1995). Vicarious secondary trauma is defined as an individual's response to being exposed to another person's traumatic experiences (Figley, 1995), whereas burnout is a "state of fatigue and frustration arising from unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources leading to physical and mental exhaustion" (Guthrie et al., 2005, p. 111).

The toll on SAPros of Color's well-being as they work to serve students is further compounded by the probability of repeated exposure to students' traumatic histories. National studies indicate that 75-85% of college students have experienced some form of interpersonal or non-interpersonal trauma or traumatic event (Cusack et al., 2018; Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2014), including sexual violence, abuse, severe mental health episode, death of a loved one, or natural disaster (Lynch & Glass, 2018; Read et al., 2014). Moreover, there are some populations, often served by SAPros of Color, who are "at a greater risk for specific types of trauma, such as racial discrimination" (Pieterse et al., 2010 as cited by Preston-Jackson et al., 2021, p.1).

Furthermore, while some first-year students arrive to campus with PTSD symptoms or significant trauma histories (Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2014), another 56% of students report having experienced a very difficult or traumatic situation in the past 12 months (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment [ACHA], 2019). Since the Centers for Disease Control & Kaiser Permanente launched its landmark 1998 study on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), recent study data also suggests that two out of three U.S. children have experienced a potentially traumatic event before their 18th birthday (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022; Lecy & Osteen, 2022). Given these statistics, SAPros of Color, especially those who work in direct student services, would necessarily encounter many such students.

Studies also show that underrepresented Students of Color, who are more likely to have experienced trauma than their White peers (Landertinger et al., 2021; Lipson, 2018) are more likely to turn to student affairs professionals who reflect their background for support rather than to White professionals (Landertinger et al., 2021, Luedke, 2017). This increases the burden on both new/early career to mid-level to Professionals of Color. Despite this, empirical studies on the impact of trauma support work on student affairs professionals' well-being are limited. Most existing studies focus on burnout and compassion fatigue concepts which, while useful, fail to consider the impact of repeated exposure to traumatized individuals' own personal and professional well-being as an outcome of trauma support work specifically (Lynch & Glass, 2020). Remen's metaphor (as cited by Altmaier, 2020), likely applies here: "The expectation that [SAPros of Color] can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it, is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet" (p. 52). Thus, the demands faced by SAPros of Color likely not only makes it difficult to sustain positive mental

health or engage in self-care practices but also takes a toll on their physical bodies (Quaye et al., 2019).

SAPros of Color are also not immune from experiencing racialized micro-aggressions, racism, nor subsequently developing racial battle fatigue in their professional helping role (Quaye et al., 2020). Racial battle fatigue is the cumulative mental, emotional, and physical racism-related strains (including micro-aggressions) experienced by People of Color that can manifest as psychophysiological symptoms – from depression and anxiety to frustration and shock (Franklin, 2016; Franklin et al., 2014). Conditions emerge from encountering racism by individuals and/or hostile work environments. These negative racialized experiences are further magnified as SAPros of Color continue to support Students of Color who "are also experiencing the cumulative effects of racism on their bodies" (Quaye et al., 2020, p.609); they may experience secondary trauma as a result.

Despite these professional role strains, extant literature indicates that many SAPros enter the field due to their own lived experiences and desire to give back. This dedication, coupled with student affairs' professional standards of practice, makes their work very personal (Sambile, 2018) and very taxing. While most student affairs professionals do not receive any specialized training or counseling licensure, most SAPros positions require direct contact with students. These roles, combined with barriers experienced, also contribute to SAPros of Color's sense of inefficacy - which is another dimension of burnout.

Lastly, studies on attrition from student affairs generally indicate that staff leave due to professional burnout. Other reasons, already investigated, include "fit" with the institutional culture, lack of professional development and/or effective supervision (Burke et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2016; Tull, 2006). Thus, as large, tier-one research institutions continue to

diversify, they need to focus attention on understanding SAPros of Color's unique workplace stressors to best minimize burnout, support holistic well-being, and maximize their retention.

## Existing Research

### *Understanding the State of Student Affairs Professionals of Color Job Stress and Well-being*

This study explored the job stressors experienced by Student Affairs Staff of Color working in a large, tier-one research institution. While specific research on SAPros of Color is currently limited, even fewer studies examine intersections between their racial identity, work experiences, and overall professional and personal well-being. However, such data are critical to institutions if they are to fulfill their employee wellness goals, retain diverse staff, and advance their diversity and equity mission.

### *Employee Wellness Programs & SAPros of Color - Solid Return on Investment or Missing the Mark?*

Despite the limited research in this area, university employers are aware that staff experience work-related stressors that negatively impact their physical, social, and emotional well-being, as demonstrated by their attention to this issue. Universities – like private sector employers – have dedicated substantial amounts of money in health packages and institutional programs that attend to growing stress and burnout problems among their employees. Most universities and colleges - similar to 56% of small business and 99% of large private business sectors (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019) - offer some form of employee assistance program (EAP) within their healthcare benefit packages. With the advent of government investments such as the Affordable Care Act (ACA) over 10 years ago, higher education intuitions were then able to implement workplace wellness programs to further improve employee health, workforce productivity, and lower health care costs (Reif et al., 2020; Song et al., 2019). The University of

California (UC), the largest public university system in the US and often a leader in R1 policy and programming, for instance, offers a myriad of initiatives, programs, and services at both system and campus-levels. System-level offerings include EAPs, work-life balance programs, system-wide initiatives (i.e., walking programs), and employment plan benefits that specifically focus on improving employee's physical, financial, nutritional, and emotional well-being. At the campus-level, on-site offerings such as tobacco cessation and diabetes prevention programs, reduced-fee recreation memberships, free fitness programs, and other support services (i.e., Diversity & Title IX Offices) aim to increase staff access to resources that help to promote their holistic well-being (Regents of the University of California, n.d.).

Despite these substantial investments, existing research indicates that such programs have limited measurable impacts on employee health and productivity (Reif et al., 2020; Song et al., 2019). For example, the *UC System-wide Metric 2017-19 Report* (Regents of the University of California, n.d.) on UC's four pillars of well-being - *emotional, financial, nutritional, and physical well-being* – fails to demonstrate associations between UC investment, staff well-being, and productivity. While the *emotional pillar* aims to encourage employees to seek assistance and increase their awareness of behavioral health benefits, data reveals a continual decrease in behavioral health benefit utilization from 2017 through 2019. Campus specific data on behavioral health benefits utilization, including professionals' engagement with emotional wellness programs, is not publicly available. Nor is information on SAPros' experiences in such programs, their efficacy, and whether such programs adequately target SAPros generally or SAPros of Color's' specific needs.

Alternatively, other studies on population-specific emotional well-being programs like, Florida Atlantic University's *Caring for Self* course (Blum, 2014), have had some success in

promoting an individual's self-care taking behaviors, practices, and overall well-being. Florida Atlantic University achieved this by integrating well-being supports into existing professional/graduate training program curricula. However, these co-curricular interventions also fail to take into consideration that Students of Color, like SAPros of Color, may endure additional unique emotional burdens within higher education settings. Thus, a one-size-fits-all employee well-being program approach will likely not work. This research gap further underscores the need to understand intersections between SAPros of Color's unique job stressors, how they cope, and the institutional systems, practices, and supports that help them best cope.

***Meeting at the Intersection: Cultivating Self-care Promoting Work Environments + Increased Attention to EDI Across Institutions + Understanding SAPros of Color Job Stress***

In recent years, many tertiary educational institutions have placed an increased emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly universities that operate using significant public funds. The work of SAPros of Color is central to this goal, yet little is known about these professionals. As the college-going population continues to become more ethnically/racially diverse, retaining and hiring staff that mirror these diverse identities remains essential, so everyone has a sense of community. Yet, as other diversity studies have indicated, SAPros of Color will likely encounter inequitable racialized strain (i.e., cultural taxation, imbalanced student support workload, heightened emotional labor) from fulfilling roles that fall outside of their official roles that White counterparts don't face (Hibbler, 2020; Luedke, 2017). This study will deeply explore and highlight SAPros of Color's job stressors and experiences so institutions can take proactive steps in lessening these burdens.

## Study Overview

This qualitative study of SAPros of Color in a single, large, tier-one research university sought to understand the work-related job stressors, coping strategies, and supports needed by SAPros of Color (new/early career to mid-level professionals) who supported and/or provided direct support services to Students of Color, many of whom have experienced some form of trauma and/or crisis. This research study sought to explore the manifestation of job-related stressors including compassion fatigue, STS, burnout, and racialized role strain coupled with racial battle fatigue. By asking about coping strategies, I examined the extent to which they were able to engage in positive self-care taking behaviors and practices to help mitigate impacts on their well-being. I also probed what SAPros of Color at this site said are institutional systems and support practices that promoted, would have promoted, and/or inhibited their self-care taking behaviors and practices. This framework of inquiry is informed by Perez et al.'s (2010) open-ended questions designed to explore burnout and STS among law enforcement investigators. By understanding these factors, this site and other institutions will be better positioned to foster SAPros of Color's overall well-being and provide support to retain them.

## Research Questions

I sought to answer four questions:

- RQ#1 - What job-related stressors, including racialized job-stressors, do SAPros of Color who support/may have to support Students of Color experiencing trauma or crisis, experience, if any?
- RQ#2 - What strategies do SAPros of Color use to cope with their job stressors?
- RQ#3 - What current and desired institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports, if any, do SAPros of Color need to best cope with their job stressors?

- RQ#4 - What current institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports facilitate or create barriers to SAPros of Color use of these supports?

## Study Design

This qualitative study explored SAPros of Color's job-stressors, coping strategies, and desired coping supports. Using semi-structured interviews, this study sought to understand how SAPros of Color's job-stressors manifested in their lives and intersected with their racial identity and work roles. Further, this qualitative approach explored and examined SAPros of Color's coping strategies, and the institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports they said impacted their capacity to cope with these job-stressors (i.e., compassion fatigue, vicarious secondary traumatic stress (STS), burnout, racialized role strain, racial battle fatigue). To answer the research questions, this study recruited and interviewed 20 SAPros of Color who provide direct service and support to Students of Color in both academic and non-academic settings at a large, tier-one research university in Southern California. A more in-depth description of the methods can be found in Chapter 3.

## Study Significance

This study centered on the voices of SAPros of Color, which are underrepresented in research literature. Deep probing revealed experiences not recorded in the literature, requiring an interviewer's empathy and responsiveness. These findings seek to provide institutional leaders with important insights on any future system-wide supports and actions. Additionally, institutions could use these findings to develop more equitable policies, programs, and ethical practices towards sustaining SAPro of Color's well-being and their capacity to persist and not burn out from their work. In addition, I hope study findings will provide SAPros of Color tools to strengthen their self-care taking behaviors to better cope with workplace stressors. More

importantly, it will remove the sole responsibility for well-being placed on student affairs professionals by highlighting what SAPros of Color said they needed from their organization and the support and inhibiting mechanisms that impacted how they cope. Overall, it will acknowledge the impact of unhealthy work environments, hostile campus climates, and systemic oppressions experienced by SAPros of Color (Quaye et al., 2019).

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education in the United States has continuously evolved, having amassed over 4,000 U.S. institutions since its inception (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). To support students' holistic development both inside and outside of the classroom, many institutions created student affairs divisions (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Professional roles within student affairs are broadly classified into *leadership* (top officers, heads, supervisors) or *frontline* (coordinator, standard, or counselor) positions (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018) with much of the work focused on direct student services. Data has shown that 71% of all student affairs professionals fall into frontline categories with intensive responsibilities (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018), raising issues of compassion fatigue, burnout, and the need for self-care practice.

To contextualize SAPros of Color's stressors, this literature review first provides an overview of student affairs and its changing staff and student demographics. It then examined workplace attrition and explains why SAPros of Color's workplace stressors affecting their health and wellness (i.e., compassion fatigue, vicarious secondary traumatic stress (STS), burnout, racialized role strain, racial battle fatigue) justify focused attention on self-care practice within the profession. Next, a review of extant literature on workplace stress, its manifestation, and impact on SAPros' well-being is addressed. From here, I discuss existing self-care promoting supports and interventions for all SAPros but noting those targeting SAPros of Color. Lastly, I introduce the guiding conceptual framework informed by social-ecological model, intersectional theory, and compassion fatigue.

## History of Student Affairs

Student affairs' emergence is traced back to the American Council on Education's seminal 1937 *The Student Personnel Point of View* report. This report charged institutions to provide non-academic student personnel services (beyond an institution's instructional and administrative functions) that support students' intellectual, emotional, physical, social, vocational, moral, economic, and aesthetic aptitudes. As a result of this seminal report, student affairs departments today continue to incorporate a holistic view of student development whereby learning happens both inside and outside the classroom (ACE, 1937; Pritchard et al., October 2018). Therefore, exploring student affairs' workplace challenges is a critical first step towards understanding SAPros' workplace stress and self-care practices.

## Who is on the Frontline? Student Affairs Professionals and the Changing Student Body Workplace Landscape

### Critical Challenges

Research on Student Affairs Professionals of Color specifically is currently limited. However, studies examining student affairs professionals' workplace experiences and challenges do offer some insight into issues SAPros of Color are likely to encounter or types of support needed. According to Schwartz and Stewart (2017), student affairs professionals face three workplace challenges. First, increasing student diversity means SAPros must support students with more complex needs (i.e., navigating a hostile campus climate, intergroup conflict, isolation, mental health, social welfare needs like housing and food insecurity, etc.). Second, this increase in diverse enrollment coupled with less funding and higher education costs has increased burdens on students, many of whom are pursuing additional work or are anxious about their ability to pay off loans in the future. This is a particular challenge for low-income students

(a subgroup that is likely to be first-generation and/or Students of Color) because they are also more likely to be connected with student affairs programs and services dedicated to supporting and retaining them. Lastly, business model pressures for greater efficiency force SAPros to take on more responsibility with minimal staff or fiscal support as well as reductions to direct student services/programs (Prichard & McChesney, 2018). Despite these challenges, SAPros are expected to meet students "where they are" which means providing extensive tailored support while simultaneously fulfilling an array of diverse roles and responsibilities.

**Compounding Issues**

Student affairs professionals' roles vary significantly. Some SAPros may be responsible for large-scale event coordination or serve as first responders for students in crisis (Javinar, 2000; Mullen et al., 2018; Rosser, 2000). Others may provide human services such as residential life, student activities, financial aid, judicial affairs, health services and counseling (Javinar, 2000; Mullen et al., 2018; Rosser, 2000).

Roles and responsibilities scope are influenced not just by job titles but also by SAPros social identities. For underrepresented student populations who share a social or personal identity with a SAPro (e.g., ethnicity/race, gender, first-generation), these student affairs professionals often become students' "go-to" confidants on campus (Landertinger et al., 2021, Luedke, 2017). This commonality facilitates formation of mentor/mentee relationships and in turn, positively influences students' sense of belonging and capacity to thrive and persist. However, SAPros' tendency to be altruistic and self-sacrificing of their own wellness to meet students' needs (Miller, 2016; Naifeh & Kearney, 2020) further impacts their role by limiting their time.

Because SAPros have a desire to help students, especially when critical student support needs arise, these mutual relationships become magnified and enmeshed within higher

education's "do more with less" environment (Anderson, 2020; Burke et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2009; Miller, 2016). These SAPro-to-student interactions are often a unilateral process, not a reciprocal relationship. Thus, the potential effect of these interactions on student affairs professionals' wellness and their ability to effectively cope with these demands are rarely taken into account. This is likely to be even more true for SAPros of Color, who bear the additional burdens of cultural taxation and racialized role strain that White colleagues do not (Anderson, 2020 & 2021; Husband, 2016; Sambile, 2018).

## Got SAPros of Color? Diversifying Student Affairs in the Face of a Changing Student Body

SAPros of Color face an increasingly diverse student body. While student affairs is demographically more diverse than other college professions, most racial demographic groups remain underrepresented in the field (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). For instance, research data has suggested that while 20% of college students are Hispanic, roughly 10% of SAPros are Hispanic. Similarly, approximately 5% of SAPros are Asian women and men combined, while 8% of students are Asian (NCES, 2021a & 2021b; Pritchard et al., 2018). According to NCES (2016) projections, a 15% increase in the Hispanic student population, a 7% increase in the Black student population, and a corresponding 8% decrease in the proportion of White college students are predicted by 2026. However, growth in SAPros of Color representation that mirrors the student body remains slow (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). To date, there is no data on the level of representativeness of student affairs professionals to student populations they serve based on race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (Furr, 2018). As student population demographics evolve, the need for SAPros of Color demographics to mirror the student population will continue to be of great importance.

**Attrition Rates and Contributing Factors**

Added to SAPros of Color's professional challenges are their own lived experiences in college and desires to give back to Students of Color like them, which makes their professional labor deeply personal (Sambile, 2018). The personal cost from the emotional labor endured from listening and attending to other's emotional needs or going above and beyond to support students experiencing crisis may lead to additional workload burdens or racialized role strain experiences which may present as racial battle fatigue. This cost can manifest as compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995), vicarious secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995), and burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). All three are strongly linked to attrition (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018).

Mullen et al. (2018) studied the relationship between job stress, burnout, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions among 789 SAPros. Findings indicated that both job stress and burnout predicted participants' lack of job satisfaction. Additionally, these findings showed that burnout is also linked to SAPros' intentions to leave their job. Mullen et al. (2018) go on to state that participants with higher stress and burnout were more likely to be dissatisfied with their job and had greater intentions to leave the field.

Similarly, Marshall et al. (2016) study found that stress and burnout were the two most frequently cited themes (out of seven) linked to a SAPros' departure from student affairs. Notably, among 153 study participants who completed both quantitative and qualitative online surveys, 41.7% of participants spent one to five years in the field before leaving, 21.7% of participants left after eight-to-ten years. When combined, over 60% of participants left the student affairs field in ten years or less (Marshall et al., 2016). Other attrition studies further supported these findings, indicating that 20% to 40% of new SAPros leave student affairs within the first six years of professional practice (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Marshall et al., 2016; Renn &

Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull et al., 2009; Ward, 1995). In fact, some attrition studies indicated that newer SAPros leave their current job or the student affairs field altogether due to workplace stress and burnout (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Naifeh & Kearney, 2020). Thus, the growing body of research focused on SAPro attrition inherently reflects the magnitude of responsibilities and challenges they are experiencing in their work (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Overall, research findings indicated that SAPros' professional well-being plays a critical role in their job satisfaction and retention.

**Student Affairs Professionals of Color Attrition – How do they Fare?**

Most attrition studies primarily focused on the reasons why SAPros at large leave the field, overlooking reasons for departure among SAPros of Color specifically. The absence of race in such studies limits our understanding of the unique experiences and job stressors faced by SAPros of Color, their quality of professional work life, and their well-being. Among the few studies that may have explored race as a variable, most focused on specific sub-populations such as African-American, Asian-American or Latinx, whereas this study is focused on SAPros of Color as a collective group. However, when SAPros of Color experience positive quality of life and well-being, they are better prepared to support the complex needs of the students they serve (Luedke, 2017; Sambile, 2018; Velasco Fuentes, 2021).

**Attrition Prevention - A Case for Self-Care Practice in Student Affairs**

Despite growing research on burnout, job satisfaction, and attrition within the student affairs field (Boyer, 1987; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Murphy, 2001; Tseng, 2004; Tull, 2006), limited literature addressed SAPros of Color's well-being and self-care practices. However, there is similar research in other fields. Amongst the research available on staff well-being within other helping professions, most is centered in

clinical contexts like health care workers, social workers, and therapeutic professions (Jackson-Preston et al., 2021; Miller, 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Stoves, 2014). Outcomes from this research served to highlight relationships between workplace stressors and compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, burnout, and self-care practice in clinical fields.

According to Jackson-Preston et al. (2021), self-care practice is recommended for mitigating the effects of compassion fatigue among helping professions like social work (Bloomquist et. al, 2016) and psychotherapy (Figley, 2002). Empirical studies by Salhoum et al. (2015 as cited by Jackson-Preston et al., 2021) also indicated a positive association between self-care practice and reduced risks for burnout among child welfare workers. Similarly, studies among other health care professional groups have also shown a positive association between burnout, compassion fatigue, physical and mental well-being and self-care practice (i.e., mindfulness, self-awareness) (Jackson-Preston et al., 2021). Self-care practice, in this context, represents that act of putting one's needs first (not in a self-serving sense) by taking time out to self-reflect upon one's needs and making a conscious effort to take advantage of services and resources that foster one's health and well-being (Miller, 2016; Posluns & Gall, 2020; Sambile, 2013). Thus, these outcomes may be similar for the educational field among SAPros of Color. It is characterized as the ability to "refill and refuel oneself in healthy ways" (Gentry, 2002 as cited in Posluns & Gall, 2020, p.4), by engaging in "behaviors that maintain and promote physical and emotional well-being" (Meyers et al., 2012 as cited in Posluns & Gall, 2020, p. 4) by lessening the "amount of stress, anxiety, or emotional reaction when working with clients" (Williams et al., 2010, as cited in Posluns & Gall, 2020, p. 4).

Norcross and Guy (2007, as cited by Posluns & Gall, 2020) further asserted that if practitioners are to provide effective care to their clients, then they must first be well themselves.

Several clinical care regulating bodies have included practitioner self-care in their code of ethics as an additional dimension of responsible caring (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Although student affairs does not have similar regulations for SAPros, national student affairs associations like the American College Personnel Association (ACHA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) emphasize self-wellness within their personal and ethical foundations' professional competency category (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018).

**Capacity for Self-care Practice**

One option for reducing workplace stress, the impact of compassion fatigue, and potential burnout is for SAPros of Color to engage in self-care practices. Student Affairs Professionals of Color's proactive engagement in such practices requires their ability to establish healthy boundaries in their interpersonal interactions with both colleagues and students. However, these boundaries are challenging to maintain. For instance, while university counseling centers are responsible for supporting students' mental and emotional needs, they are also underutilized by minority and/or under-represented student population groups (Raimondi, 2019). Instead, these students are likely to seek support from SAPros with whom they have a shared social identity or relationship with first, before eventually seeking out support from a counseling center (Luedke, 2017; Raimondi, 2019). As a result, SAPros of Color are further stretched. When this SAPro-to-student help-seeking dynamic goes unchecked, it can evolve to become a broader, more normalized responsive function for all educational and support entities on campus instead of a function that solely rests with the campus counseling center (Miller, 2016; Mullen et al, 2018; Raimondi, 2019). Thus, it is imperative that workplace cultures, policies, and practices support SAPros of Color's capacities to proactively engage in self-care practices in and outside of work.

The need for supportive and self-care promoting work environments is further indicated in several student affairs attrition studies. SAPros at large institutions reported positive self-efficacy towards engaging in positive well-being practices, greater job satisfaction, and are less likely to leave their job and/or the field of student affairs when supervisors are supportive, provide clear expectations, are understanding, flexible and afford greater autonomy (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Marshall, 2016; Mullen et al, 2018). Marshall et al.'s (2016) empirical study of 153 student affairs professionals who exited the field further affirmed supervisors' important role in SAPro retention as 42% of these study participants indicated feeling undervalued and unsupported by their supervisor as the key reason for their departure. While SAPros' supervisory "fit" is essential, other studies further suggested that staff members' capacity for self-care practice is also attitudinal-based. Despite limited research on SAPros of Color in particular, there are other empirical studies that suggest self-care can be protective for staff in helping professions (Bloomquist et al., 2016).

Ultimately, these studies reveal student affairs' responsibility to effectively role model and support SAPros of Color's capacities to proactively engage in their own self-care practice. Failure to do so impacts SAPro of Color's retention and thus when professionals leave, resources invested in them are not only lost but so too are the ideas and innovations they would have contributed to the campus had they stayed (Tull et al., 2009).

**Student Affairs Professionals Feeling the Impact: Influential Factors on Well-being**

**Workplace Stress - What is it? Why does it matter?**

Selye (1976, as cited by Fink, 2016) originally described workplace stress as a person's non-specific bodily response to any difficult event or demand. Since then, the definition evolved with authors like French, Caplan, & Harrison (1982, as cited by Mullen et al., 2018) who

described stress as an event which puts a demand on a person or as a threatening environment condition. Starting in 1983, stress was broadened to a work context to encompass the interplay between the individual and their workplace environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Parker & DeCotiis, 1983). According to Fink (2016) however, stress remains difficult to define in absolute terms. Its meaning varies for different people under different conditions and the "magnitude of the stress and its physiological consequences are influenced by the individual's perception of their ability to cope with the stressor" (Fink, 2016, p. 5).

Conceptually, the evolution of the definition of stress is both indicative of its complexity and the importance of viewing SAPros of Color's well-being through a multi-dimensional lens versus one-dimensionally (i.e., individual-level). Within the SAPro role at large, data indicated that many influential workplace stressors exist due to the nature of the role, unclear and ambiguous expectations, competing commitments, lack of resources or supervisory support, increased student demands and expectations (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Tull, 2006). Understanding Student Affairs Professionals of Color's abilities to cope and manage these demands is essential. The magnitude of workplace stress is already enormous for SAPros of Color (Anderson, 2020; Glass & Lynch, 2018; Mullen et al., 2018) which has been pushed even higher with global events like the COVID-19 pandemic (Knight et al, 2021). Depending on how these stressors manifest, they can trigger a stress response that negatively impacts SAPros of Color's well-being, work capacity, and ultimately lead to their burnout.

### *Burnout - A Symptom of Workplace Stress*

Burnout is another aspect of workplace stress that when prolonged, could potentially negatively influence SAPros of Color's well-being. American psychologist Herbert

Freudenberger (1974) defined workplace burnout as the depletion of an employee's energy and social resources due to excessive work (Maten, 2020). Later, Maslach (1982), expanded upon this definition, adding environmental and organizational factors as likely to contribute to burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2008) further extended this definition, identifying six work environment domains (i.e., workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values) that contribute to fifteen forms of burnout. Work-related issues such as job dissatisfaction, decreased motivation, and job turnover have distinct connections to workplace stress and burnout as well. Although burnout definitions vary, for the purposes of this study, burnout is defined as the "response to prolonged exposure to demanding interpersonal situations, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment" (Maslach et al., 2001). While research on SAPros' workplace stress, burnout and attrition does exist, much of it is limited or is more than decade old (Miller, 2016; Mullen et al., 2018) thus, warranting even further research on SAPros of Color's experiences given "what is known about the deleterious effects of stress and burnout on [SAPros]" (Mullen et al., 2018. p. 96).

### *Compassion Fatigue - A Symptom of Workplace Stress*

Burnout and compassion fatigue are both symptoms of work-related stresses that impact personal and professional well-being. Compassion fatigue, a term coined by Carla Johnson (1992 as cited by Figley, 2002), has evolved to describe the overall negative psychological and emotional fatigue (i.e., diminished capacity for empathy) that healthcare workers, as helping professionals, experience as a natural consequence of their repeated, daily exposure to patient suffering (Adams et al., 2006; Figley, 1995 & 2002; Stoves, 2014). It is considered a syndrome consisting of both burnout and secondary traumatic stress symptoms (Figley, 1995). Although compassion fatigue has similar symptoms to burnout, burnout emerges over time, is directly

linked to stressors at work or one's personal life, and leaves individuals feeling "worn out" (Figley, 1995; Maten, 2020). Whereas the personal impact of secondary traumatic stress experienced emerges from wanting to help or helping a traumatized/suffering person (Figley, 1999), the intensity of experience, and one's proximity to the event (May & Wisco, 2016 as cited by Lynch & Glass, 2018).

Stoves (2014) argued that SAPros are another group that are prone to compassion fatigue due to the helping/caregiving nature of their work that is somewhat similar to health service workers. The lack of research on SAPros' compassion fatigue, as Raimondi (2019) posited, is largely due to the field's lack of language to frame this problem correctly within higher education contexts whereas in other helping profession literature, those helped/served (e.g., patients) are viewed as suffering. Therefore, this band of literature typically focused on compassion fatigue causal factors, secondary trauma, and its mitigation (Radey & Figley, 2007; Raimondi, 2019). Such gaps in literature reflect the need to better understand SAPros of Color's lived experiences as individuals who may be impacted by compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. Adding to this gap is that there are few quantitative studies that examine this phenomenon among student affairs. Although instruments measuring secondary trauma among other helping professionals, like nursing and social work, do exist, instruments specific to student affairs works are very limited (Lynch & Glass, 2018).

Lynch and Glass's (2018) promising *Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale (STSAP)* quantitative assessment instrument study however, helped to narrow this literature gap. Lynch and Glass (2018) developed the STSAP instrument and found some measures of trauma that suggested about 40% of SAPros work with students experiencing trauma at least a few days a month and mild symptoms of secondary trauma overall, among a sample of 617

student affairs professionals. The highest subscale was 3.10, on the changes in physical arousal and reactivity scale. For SAPros and departmental leaders alike, STSAP offers practical applications for addressing secondary trauma within higher education, including enhanced insight on the impact of student support on personal well-being and capacity to develop supportive workplace environments. Thus, exploring student affairs professional roles through this helping lens can (a) help build conceptual frameworks and literature foundations for exploring this topic more and (b) increase SAPros' awareness, skills, and capacity for addressing compassion fatigue when it emerges (Miller, 2016; Raimondi, 2019). To better understand how work-related stressors impact SAPros of Color's well-being, this study reinforces the importance of applying a contextual lens to the student affairs workplace environment, as well as utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine and understand the magnitude of SAPros of Color's nuanced workplace stressors.

## Intersectionality: Influence of SAPros' Marginalized Social Identities and Self-care Practices

In addition to SAPros of Color's need for supportive and self-care promoting work environments, their capacity for self-care practice is also influenced by their experience of compassion fatigue as a result of supporting students like them. This type of assistance and fatigue, when on-going, can continue to manifest in a negative way for them (Furr, 2018). Having to endure the emotional labor of supporting students with shared identities, along with encountering racial battle fatigue (e.g., behavioral, physiological, and psychological stress responses from the cumulative impact of racial microaggression experiences (Franklin et. al, 2014)) as they navigate working in a helping profession where they are often expected to prioritize students' needs above their own, not only makes it difficult to practice self-care, it also

takes a toll on their bodies (i.e., mentally, physically) (Quaye et al., 2019). The impact of racial battle fatigue is also likely mirrored in and exacerbated by the cumulative toll that SAPros of Color may experience when they hold multiple intersecting marginalized identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status), the experience of which Crenshaw (1991) refers to as *Intersectionality.* The difficulty of practicing self-care in the face of intersectional experiences of structural and systemic oppression is particularly worthy of study. What is more, even if SAPros of Color do develop strategies that allow a minimal amount of coping, they may not be able to sustain themselves without purposeful attention to creating a healthy life (Furr, 2018). Thus, fostering the proactive engagement of SAPros of Color in self-care practice is essential for reducing their workplace stress, burnout, and their need to leave the student affairs field.

## The Upside of Self-Care, Critiques and Limitations

Research indicated that not only does engagement in self-care practices have a positive influence on one's overall well-being, it is also linked to a greater sense of personal accomplishment in the scope of one's work (Posluns & Gall, 2020). Within a mental health practitioners context, self-care practice is conceptualized within six domains (Posluns & Gall, 2020): *awareness* (i.e., of the job, risks and symptoms of burnout or impairment), *flexibility* (i.e., openness to using positive coping strategies), *balance* (i.e., spreading one's attention across various aspects of life and finding equilibrium in both personal and professional realms), *physical health* (i.e., engagement in health promotion behaviors like sleep, diet, exercise), *spirituality* (i.e., "a search for the sacred" in one's life; a connection with self, others, the divine, purpose and ultimate meaning) and *social support* (i.e., connection to other sources and interactions which helps one cope with stressful circumstances). These domains help provide a

clear conceptual framework for both translating and integrating self-care as common practice among SAPros of Color and within the field of student affairs' norms and values.

Although literature on SAPros, wellness (self-care), and job attrition does exist, the intersection of all three fields is limited (Naifeh &Kearney, 2020); and even more so for SAPros of Color. Conflicting expert opinions about self-care practice within the workplace further contributed to this literature gap. For instance, some researchers questioned the utility of self-care for SAPros while others pointed to student affairs administrators' contradictory mixed messaging and behaviors like espousing self-care's virtues while also providing little-to-no infrastructural support to fully integrate it (Sambile, 2018). Other experts perceived self-care practice to be a buzzword used across student affairs that often ignores the nuances of taking care of oneself (Miller, 2016; Quaye et al., 2019). Referencing Squire and Nicolazzo's (2019) research, Quaye et al. (2019) further posited that self-care is often rhetoric by student affairs organizations - "a vacuous concept that fails to consider systems of oppression and the role of power involved in self-care" (p. 101). Wyatt and Ampadu (2021) further contended that self-care for Communities of Color does work but requires organizational and system-level programs and/or initiatives that are supportive of and responsive to individuals' unique self-care needs. Thus, student affairs organizations could demonstrate their commitment to SAPros of Color self-care practice by creating support mechanisms that considered the "impact of oppression and intersectional identities on the lived experiences of Communities of Color and how this can influence self-care practices" (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021. p.4).

In contrast, Miller (2016) asserted that given the efficacy of self-care practice and its beneficial effects for reducing negative health and well-being outcomes for mental health practitioners, SAPros must force both themselves and colleagues to take care of themselves. First

by taking an introspective look at their own lives, making the necessary changes to take better care of themselves, and role modeling the behaviors they wanted to see in others (Miller, 2016). Achieving this requires a hard look at the institutional structures that inhibit and/or exacerbate good self-care, and modifying policies or practices in support of health and wellness (Davis & Cooper, 2016; Miller, 2016; Naifeh & Kearney, 2020; Quaye et al., 2019). Despite these conflicting opinions, examining SAPros of Color's self-care practices within this intersectional lens provides an additional layer of complexity and salience that's worthy of further study.

## Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework used to guide this study was grounded in the *Social-Ecological Model* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), *Critical Race Theory* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), *Intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989), and the concept of compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995; Johnson, 1992). These frameworks provided a collective lens to explore SAPros of Color's work-related stressors and their impact on SAPros of Color's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Theory of Intersectionality and the Socio-Ecological Model also provided a frame for uncovering and understanding factors (i.e., inhibitive, supportive) that influenced SAPros of Color's ability to effectively cope with these stressors. All three guided my protocol development, data analysis, and how I examined and reflected upon the data. This approach further supported this study's aim to address a gap in research literature by exploring these factors through centering SAPros of Color who provide non-instructional direct support to Students of Color voices and experiences, often overlooked in this research area.

### Socio-Ecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Socio-Ecological Model* provides a systems-settings level approach to understand and address SAPros of Color's workplace well-being in a holistic and

practical way. Originating from the field of child development, Bronfenbrenner's social ecological framework has been used by researchers with various disciplinary interests to analyze human relationships in and with particular contexts (Bone, 2015). It emphasizes the centrality of human-to-human interactions to human development and places these interactions at the center of multiple contextual influences. It emphasizes the interaction between, and interdependence of, multiple factors operating at multiple levels - personal (i.e., biological, psychological), organizational/institutional, environmental (i.e., both social and physical), and policy level – within and across an entire ecosystem (Rimer & Glanz, 2005). In a contemporary health promotion context, these interactions influence an individuals' development and health behaviors, population health status, and promotion of holistic well-being. This includes environmental factors (i.e., workplace stress, social interactions with others) that can impact both health and well-being outcomes, as well as, implementation of effective health promotion interventions (i.e., self-care practice, health policies) to best address these different levels of health determinants. Thus, the Social-Ecological Model provided a framework for exploring SAPros of Color's own self-care practices along with developing a deeper understanding of the institutional/departmental mechanisms operating across multiple levels that promoted and/or inhibited SAPros of Color's capacity to cope with job stressors.

**Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality**

While the Socio-Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) offers a systems-settings level process for promoting and addressing SAPros of Color's well-being issues across multiple settings for which they are embedded, it does not explicitly account for structural oppression. Nor the way it influences how SAPros of Color experience, and how it shapes organizational settings (Roy, 2018) in which SAPros of Color's workplace experiences occur, to the same

extent that a critical perspective allows. *Critical Race Theory* (CRT), as a movement contributes to our understanding of the racialized experiences SAPros of Color may experience in their work environment. Originating in academic education and legal studies, CRT provides a theoretical framework for examining how race and racism is embedded in policies, practices, laws, and institutional power structures which intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate racial inequality (Kolivoski, 2022). It further posits that race is a social construct; and that racism is not solely a personal experience of individual bias or prejudice, but rather it is embedded in legal systems' policies and structures which inherently discriminate, disadvantage, and oppress. While CRT suggests that it is essential to consider structural racism within broader contexts (i.e., historical, social, economic), as Kolivoski (2022) notes, the framework also includes other key theoretical tenets: "whiteness as the ultimate property (Harris, 1995); racism is ordinary (Bell, 1992, 1995), counter-storytelling the unique Voices of Color (Matsuda, 1991), and intersectionality (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1991)."

Crenshaw, a legal scholar, expanded on CRT in her innovative *Intersectionality* (1989) framework which introduced a CRT perspective that recognizes the presence of multiple, overlapping social identities. In particular, Intersectionality provides a valuable lens for understanding how key intrapersonal factors contribute to SAPros of Color's workplace stress and coping strategies above and beyond the CRT framework. Intersectionality provides a framework to understand, reflect upon, and synthesizing data around how study participants' (i.e., SAPros of Color) *multiple* identities (i.e., race, gender, socio-economic status, ability, sexuality, class) intersect within their work roles, workplace setting, and stressors experienced. Through this framework, we can enhance our understanding on how SAPros of Color navigate their work environment, how others perceive and treat them, and how these experiences

ultimately inform their overall world view (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021). Furthermore, intersectional theory reinforces the importance of providing ways for diverse SAPros of Color to share their experiences. It "emphasizes the importance of examining and attempting to understand the socio-cultural forces that shape how [SAPros of Color] and others perceive, experience, and respond to [workplace 'isms]" (Purdue Owl, 2022).'Isms (i.e., racism, sexism, classism) that can influence SAPros of Color's racialized role strains or racial battle fatigue experiences that stem from their work in supporting students of color in distress.

Without this framework, our ability to analyze the impact of SAPros of Color's work-related racial stressors is reduced to a singular lens, ignoring the other identities that collectively shape their experiences. Wyatt and Ampadu (2021) further state:

> "The ability to recognize that we all have intersecting identities allows us to validate our lived experiences fully. Self-care practices are limited and incomplete when they do not attend to the well-being of "whole" selves, including all identities and their unique needs" (p. 3).

Lastly, positioning CRT and Theory of Intersectionality both individually and jointly within my conceptual framework served to reinforce their connection, as both aim to identify and address structural discrimination, inequality, and center the experiences of peoples who are often "'considered "other" relative to Whites (Kolivoski, 2022).'" Exploring SAPros of Color's workplace experiences through these frameworks acknowledges that racialized job-related stressors stemming from racial discrimination can coexist with and be compounded by other forms of social identity-based discrimination (categorizations that one is assigned or born into like, age, gender, class) and personal identities (such as first-generation professional or student status or alumnus of the study site). By exploring how SAPros of Color's experience racialized

role strain and racial battle fatigue at this research site, the study helped illuminate the unique stressors that impact this population.

**Compassion Fatigue**

Compassion fatigue refers to an individual's response to being exposed to another person's traumatic experiences. Broadly, it is considered a syndrome that includes dimensions of both burnout and secondary traumatic stress symptoms (Figley, 1995). This concept informed the study's interview protocol development, given the study's aims to explore how SAPros of Color who directly support Students of Color in-crisis or with past trauma experience burnout and secondary traumatic stress symptoms, if at all. This meant developing questions that allowed study participants to reflect and share how such work may influenced their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Since STS meets the DSM-V criteria for PTSD: "negative alteration to mood or cognition, physical arousal and reactivity, emotional arousal and reactivity, avoidance, and intrusion" (McCann & Pearlman [1990] as cited by Lynch & Glass, [2018, p. 12]), follow-up questions were asked to probe more deeply. Overall, compassion fatigue is a way to understand a bundle of symptoms SAPros of Color experienced/reported and helped provide further insight on the stated research questions regarding SAPros of Color's most stressful aspects of their work role and how they cope with them.

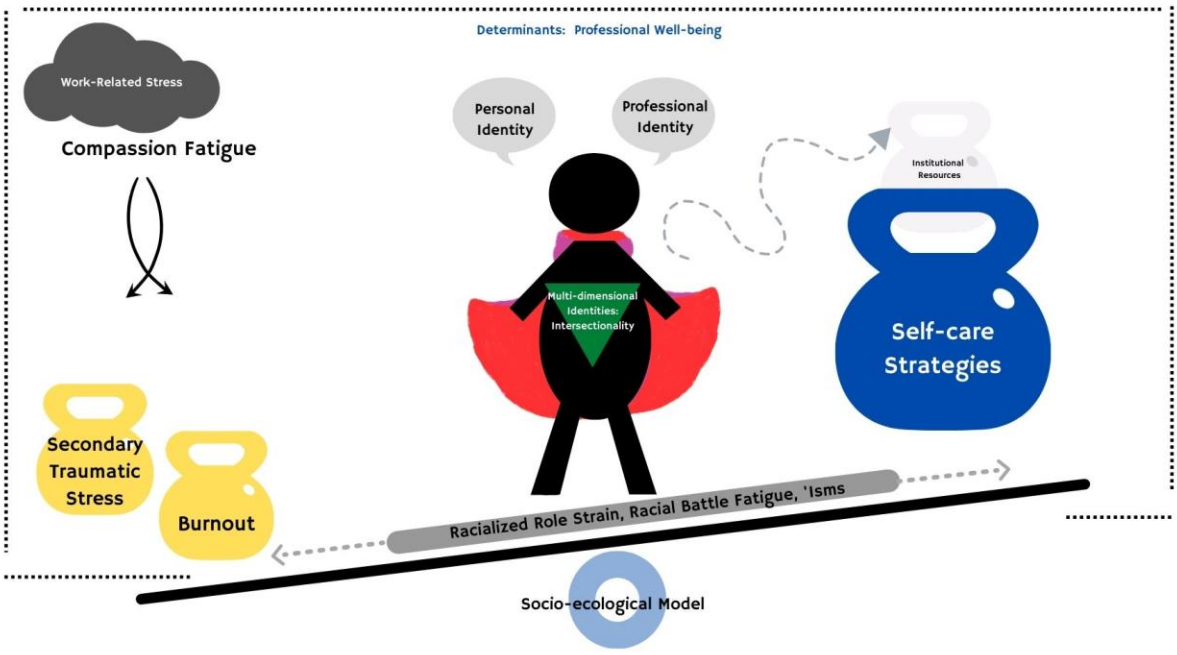
**Conceptual Framework Diagram**

*Figure 1* provides a visual representation of this study's conceptual framework (adapted from Hibbler, 2020). This figure centers SAPros of Color in the middle of a scale, as they attempt to balance both workplace stressors and self-care practices. The dumbbells on the left illustrate secondary factors that impact SAPro of Color's professional well-being beyond usual workload pressures that SAPros may encounter. Factors that are uniquely tied to intersecting

racial/ethnic identities and the toll of supporting Students of Color. Although self-care is represented by a larger dumbbell on the right as counterbalance, its weight cannot surpass the compounding impact of the factors on the left. Racialized role strain is represented along the scale's entire length, illustrating its influence along the spectrum of professional well-being determinant of health. The socio-ecological model functions as the scale's fulcrum, representing the need for and power of using a systems-settings approach to understand and address SAPros of Color's workplace well-being in a holistic and practical way. This conceptual framework was an appropriate approach because it helped with understanding SAPros of Color's unique work-related stressors, personal capacities for self-care, and institutional mechanisms that would further support their holistic well-being.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework - Garnett 2023*




*Note*: Adapted from Hibbler (2020)

## Summary and Conclusion

Given student affairs' responsibility to support the holistic development of students in and outside the classroom, the field typically attracts professionals interested in helping others. As such, SAPros of Color are challenged with effectively managing their own well-being, oftentimes subjugating their well-being and self-care practices, as they fervently work to support their students' needs. SAPros of Color's inability to engage in proactive self-care practice during the workday is further exacerbated by the higher education landscape. Evolving student, staff, and faculty demographics, changing fiscal landscapes, and the need to "do more with less" create an additional strain. Collectively, these issues elevate SAPros of Color's workplace stress, compassion fatigue (i.e., STS) experiences, racial battle fatigue and racialized role strain, and contribute further to their burnout and attrition from the field. Given the extensive amount of research available on self-care practice among clinical/healthcare professionals, SAPros of Color's similarities as helping professionals supporting others through crises further illuminates the need to broadly examine this population.

This study sought to address the gap in literature by using qualitative approaches to delve deep into very personal and often undisclosed experiences of SAPros of Color in order to understand their workplace stressors, the phenomenon of coping (e.g., self-care taking behaviors and practices), and the additional coping supports that they say are needed.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to understand the work-related job stressors, coping strategies (e.g., self-care taking behaviors and practices) and support needed by SAPros of Color (new/early career to-mid-level professionals) who support and/or provide direct services to Students of Color who have experienced some form of trauma and/or crisis. It examined potential instances of compassion fatigue (secondary traumatic stress), burnout, racialized role strains, and the extent to which SAPros of Color are able to engage in positive self-care taking behaviors and practices to help mitigate impacts on their well-being. It also probed for potential institutional systems and support practices that either promote and/or inhibit self-care taking behaviors. Findings from this study aimed to achieve two broader objectives: (a) provide SAPros of Color further insight on self-care strategies for holistic well-being while at work and (b) offer institutions/departments an evidence-based framework to inform workplace policies and practices. These would both support SAPros of Color's well-being and increase their retention.

## Research Questions

I sought to answer four questions:

- RQ#1 - What job-related stressors, including racialized job-stressors, do SAPros of Color who support/may have to support Students of Color experiencing trauma or crisis, experience, if any?
- RQ#2 - What strategies do SAPros of Color use to cope with their job stressors?
- RQ#3 - What current and desired institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports, if any, do SAPros of Color need to best cope with their job stressors?
- RQ#4 - What current institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports facilitate or create barriers to SAPros of Color use of these supports?

## Research Design and Rationale

This study utilized qualitative methods to explore SAPros of Color's job-stressors, coping strategies, and coping supports that are needed. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to deeply understand how SAPros of Color's job-stressors manifest in their lives and intersected with their racial identity and work roles. Further, this method enhanced my understanding of their coping strategies and the institutional/departmental systems, practices, and support they said impacted their capacity to cope with these job-stressors. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for exploring and providing meaningful context (Merriam, 2015) needed for understanding SAPros of Color's nuanced work lives and how they make sense of their lives. This study sought to acquire information directly from SAPros of Color and explored very personal and often undisclosed experiences, in order to best understand this phenomenon. It sought to dig deeper into participants' feelings and beliefs (Merriam, 2015) to better understand the magnitude of their job-related stressors faced as Persons of Color, impacts to their holistic well-being, and their self-care taking behaviors and practices to cope. Rather than identifying what the problem is, this qualitative study sought to answer "why" this problem exists and delved deeply into the meaning study participants gave to job-stressors experienced, their capacity to cope with them, and mechanisms that inhibited or supported their coping capacity.

Furthermore, analysis of the participants' experiences captured through semi-structured interviews allowed for "rich thick data" to be collected (Creswell, 1994, pgs.1-2), which would not be captured if a quantitative survey approach alone were solely used. In addition, a quantitative approach alone would not offer a holistic mechanism for delving deeply to understand SAPros of Color's unique experiences nor their perspectives on supportive and

inhibiting factors that impacted their ability to best manage job-stressors and associated impacts (i.e., burnout, compassion fatigue/STS, racialized role strain).

## Methods

### Site and Population

#### *Research Site Criteria and Selection Rationale*

As workplace pressures tend to increase at highly competitive institutions (Pantazes, 2021), this study sought a highly selective, public, tier-1 research university in Southern California. Additionally, it sought an institution with a significantly large pool of non-faculty and clinical front-facing professional staff but a smaller percentage of student affairs Staff of Color available to provide direct student services to under-represented Students of Color. The campus selected for this study met these requirements, possessing the largest contingency of professional staff by headcount within its university system of campuses. Although the university system has demonstrated an expressed commitment to campus diversity, inclusion, and equity, its combined under-represented undergraduate and graduate Students of Color population (defined as African American, Hispanic/Latinx, and American Indian/Native American students) is less than 30% of the total student body, despite representing over 47% of the state's general population (U.S. Census, 2021).

SAPros of Color work in various locations at this site (e.g., residential life, case management services, center for students with disabilities, financial aid, identity-based centers, academic & college counseling, etc.) and thus have a higher likelihood of supporting students with traumatic histories and/or in crisis, which made this site ideal for study. These interactions could negatively impact SAPros of Color's well-being (i.e., development of compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, etc.), which in turn could impact their ability to cope or

ultimately remain their role. This is important considering professional burnout's link to student affairs staff attrition (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018).

Given SAPros of Color's critical mass representation at this site, understanding their job stressors provides opportunities for this site to leverage findings to promote and support SAPros of Color's well-being, create mechanisms to address job stressors, and strengthen SAPros of Color's retention.

### *Population/Sample Selection and Rationale*

To achieve a diverse sample, 20 Participants of Color were recruited from student affairs/student services departments and programs located across the study site's colleges, 12 graduate/professional schools, and division of Student Affairs. The study site's division of Student Affairs alone comprises over 25 departments, programs, and services areas combined. Selection criteria to participate in the study was based on these key descriptive characteristics: one or more years in current role, identifies as a Person of Color (i.e., race/ethnicity demographic information), on staff within a student affairs' division, college, or graduate/professional school, and position (i.e., frontline direct services, entry-level staff, mid-level management/administration). As such, participants served as student development and human services providers in areas like residential life, student and campus life activities (i.e., Greek Life, student government and organizations), financial aid, judicial affairs, academic advising, in first responders-type roles for students in crisis, and under-represented identity-based affinity group program coordinators/managers.

### Access and Recruitment

I recruited participants in two ways. First, through my connections with campus-wide committees and relationships with student affairs professionals, I leveraged existing relationships

to recruit participants among those who volunteered to participate and fit my sampling criteria. This involved directly asking senior campus leaders/directors to be introduced to SAPros of Color from their departments to solicit their interest in participating in the study. Further, SAPros of Color for whom I have a relationship were directly contacted via email or phone to solicit their interest in participating. A study participant recruitment email was also sent to all professional campus group listservs and staff associations focused on Staff of Color (African American, Hispanic/LatinX, Asian & Pacific Islander, and Native & Indigenous). A recruitment flyer was used to recruit and select participants who met study criteria. The recruitment flyer was digital, was shared with the aforementioned for email sharing or physical posting, and was posted on social media. All SAPros of Color who voluntarily expressed interest in participating received an additional study information sheet and upon completing their interview, were provided monetary compensation as a token of appreciation for participating. Table 2 provides an overview of study sample characteristics regarding participants' campus roles, years of service, and personal/social identities:

**Table 2**

***Sample Characteristics***

| Characteristic | Represented |
|---|---|
| | *n* |
| Staff Role | |
| Administration | 1 |
| Student Service - Academic Advising | 4 |
| Mid-level Management/Administration | 7 |
| Student Affairs | 8 |
| Organizational Areas | |
| Administration | 2 |
| College of Letters & Science | 4 |
| Professional School | 6 |
| Student Affairs | 8 |
| Years of Service | |
| Less than 2 years (new/early career professional) | 3 |
| More than 2 years | 17 |
| Racial Identity (Self-identified) | |
| Asian/Asian-American (Japanese) | 1 |
| Indigenous/Native American | 1 |
| South Asian/Southeast-Asian (Filipino/a; Pinay) | 3 |
| Black/African-American | 5 |
| Mexican/Mexican-American/Hispanic | 8 |
| Multi-racial | 2 |

*Note: Within organizational areas, student affairs refer to those who work under the Office of Student Affairs*

## Data Collection Methods

Data was collected from December 2022 through January 2023 through semi-structured interviews that probed for the phenomena of: (a) job-stressors experienced by SAPros of Color (new and mid-management level); (b) racialized role strain experiences; (c) work-day coping strategies used (i.e., self-care taking behaviors and practices) to mitigate the effects of burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress (STS); and (d) what institutional practices and mechanisms they believe inhibit or promote their ability to cope. The research questions and interview protocol were both informed by Perez et al.'s (2010) research protocol that explored

secondary traumatic stress and burnout among forensic interviewers and law enforcement members. I pre-tested my interview protocol using cognitive interviews with 2-3 individuals to further ensure that the questions asked were understandable, unbiased, and did not lead participants to provide specific answers.

To establish a warm, welcoming environment, study participants were informed on the study's purpose; how their information provided would be gathered, stored, and analyzed; and how their consent would be procured. Warm up questions to solicit study participants' job-related demographic information (i.e., What is your job title? What department do you work for and how long have you worked there? Where does your department sit organizationally - student affairs, academic affairs, other? What are some of your main responsibilities in your program and/or position? How do you self-identify in terms of your racial/ethnic identity/identity/ies?) were asked at the start. In order to explore SAPros of Color's job stressors and workplace role strains, interview protocol questions first explored the most rewarding aspects of their work, followed by questions designed to explore and understand the most challenging aspects of their work through general and deeper probing inquiry (i.e., What is/are the most challenging (e.g., stressful) aspect/s of your work? Are any aspects of this related to how you support students? What adjustments has your department/center/program had to make to serve students in light of COVID-19?).

Furthermore, the interview protocol's design incorporated an intersectional lens to explore how SAPros of Color drew connections between their ethnic/racial identity, work roles and personal well-being (i.e., How does your racial/ethnic identity/ies intersect with both your work role/s and your personal well-being [i.e., social, emotional, mental, physical], if at all? Are there other personal/professional challenges or barriers that come with supporting and delivering

services to students of color with shared identities; especially for those with a history of trauma/crisis?). Extending this area of inquiry more deeply, follow up questions then explored institutional practices that supported and/or posed barriers to SAPros of Color's self-care taking behaviors and practices in general and while at work (i.e., When you think about the term "self-care" what does self-care mean to you/how do you define it in the context of your workplace? What messages, if any, have you received from your supervisor/executive leadership regarding staff self-care? What self-care strategies do you use to cope during the workday?).

Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom along with a secondary backup recording via an audio recorder. All notes taken were reviewed immediately post interview for accuracy and additional notation. Interview sessions lasted approximately 45-to-60 minutes.

## Data Analyses Methods

Audio recordings were transcribed using Temi transcription service. Afterwards, transcription results were compared against digital video recordings from Zoom and/or iPhone to ensure data transcription accuracy.

As a first step, I reviewed the interview data, looking for potential themes such as the type of job-related stressors SAPros of Color experienced in their support of students prone to trauma and/or crisis, coping strategies and whether these were implemented during and/or outside of work, and institutional mechanisms that support and/or inhibit their ability to cope. During this process, I also took notes, developing memos on what I heard in order to preliminarily identify themes based on my units of analysis.

Next, I re-read the transcribed data and formally began identifying themes using descriptive coding strategies based on the data. Once this initial coding round was complete, the transcripts were reviewed again to identify additional themes, including in-vivo themes. All were

collectively further coded, grouped, and regrouped using an online coding software, MAXQDA. This iterative analytic process allowed me to make sense of the data, step-back to reassess what I learned, and then determine the next steps.

## Positionality

I was aware that I needed to intentionally position myself as a UCLA Educational Leadership Program graduate student researcher first, then a Person of Color, and then as a person who has worked for several years in student affairs, and with some participants as a close colleague. As a Person of Color who conducted this study with participants who I may know or have had shared experiences in common, I think positioning myself as a researcher first allowed participants to be more open and candid with me. However, to help reduce participants' reactivity or biased responses, I also maintained a formal position with every interview session to ensure that a consistent positive tone and professional dynamic was established. I also ensured that interviewee's participation was kept confidential and was voluntary so they wouldn't feel pressured to participate. These steps, along with asserting myself as a UCLA grad student researcher first versus as a researcher for student affairs, further helped establish an inviting and trusting rapport with all participants, especially those that I didn't know.

To show my appreciation for their time and entrusting me with personal narrative, I followed up with a formal thank you card and email.

## Ethical Considerations

It was imperative to ensure that participants understood that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were not obligated to be involved. Per IRB standards, participants also signed an informed consent to be a part of the study. No identifying information was shared through the study and participants were reminded that their participation in the study

was confidential. Participants' department information was anonymous, pseudonyms were used for all participants, and codes were used on all data stored to further protect anonymity. Further, all my data was stored on my personal password-protected devices. All participants were offered a copy of transcribed notes to ensure their responses accurately reflected their perspectives before initiating data analysis. Additionally, a list of mental health resources were offered to all study participants upon request.

## Conclusion

Exploring SAPros of Color's job-stressors (including racialized job-stressors), coping strategies, as well as institutional systems that impact their capacity to cope, can offer valuable information that can be used to promote Staff of Color well-being within university settings. SAPros of Color can gain additional insights on self-care strategies that can be leveraged to promote their holistic well-being. On the other hand, institutions and departments can learn from the data on SAPros of Color's job-stressors and coping challenges to revise existing workplace policies and practices to best support SAPros of Color's well-being and capacity to thrive within the workplace, shifting employee well-being away from an individual responsibility to a collective one. Focus on SAPros of Color's well-being experiences in particular adds to existing research gaps within extant literature on employee workplace well-being.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

## Overview

This research study investigated the work-related job stressors, including racialized job-stressors, coping strategies, and supports needed by SAPros of Color (new/early career to mid-level career professionals) who support and/or provide direct services to Students of Color experiencing trauma or crisis. Semi-structured interviews with 20 SAPros of Color were conducted from December 2022 through January 2023 to answer the following questions:

- RQ#1 - What job-related stressors, including racialized job-stressors, do SAPros of Color who support/may have to support Students of Color experiencing trauma or crisis, experience, if any?
- RQ#2 - What strategies do SAPros of Color use to cope with their job stressors?
- RQ#3 - What current and desired institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports, if any, do SAPros of Color need to best cope with their job stressors?
- RQ#4 - What current institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports facilitate or create barriers to SAPros of Color use of these supports?

All 20 participants worked at a university in southern California and their position titles varied depending on their department, program, or role. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities. Following the research questions, the findings are organized by the following categories: Job-related Stressors; Impacts on Health, Wellness, and Well-being; Individual Self-Care Strategies; Current and Desired Institutional Actions. Health, Wellness, and Well-being categories were defined as: *health* - state of being, complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity; *wellness* - living a healthy

lifestyle/practice, and *well-being* - positive physical, social-emotional, cognitive welfare, life satisfaction, fulfillment, overall feeling good.

## Job-Related Stressors

Participants were asked to share stressors related to their jobs. Three broad job-related stressors emerged in the data: (1) workload stress due to department infrastructure dynamics, (2) supporting students in distress, and (3) navigating institutional bureaucracy. Through applying critical race and intersectional perspectives, I also highlight how participants own intersectionality (i.e., racial identity, racialized experiences) overlap with some of these themes, further compounding SAPros of Color's job-related stress (i.e., compassion fatigue, racial battle fatigue, cultural taxation), their wellness practices, and overall well-being.

### Department Infrastructure Dynamics

Of the twenty participants interviewed, most (17) reported workload stress due to their department's infrastructural dynamics as their top job stressor. Within this theme, participants discussed how understaffing, low Staff of Color representation in the department, ineffective policies and practices, and leadership decision-making influenced the magnitude of workload and work role strain they experienced (i.e., "having to be the catch-all for everything"), and subsequently, how they then supported of Students of Color.

Among the nine participants who reported working in understaffed departments, nearly all discussed the negative toll that managing multiple responsibilities, including some outside their job description, took on their emotional well-being. For all of these participants, this involved balancing competing demands such as: dedicating time to complete important administrative tasks, accommodating scheduled and impromptu visits with Students of Color, and meeting funding deadlines. Supporting Students of Color in emotional distress during

limited appointment time slots, while remaining aware of both other students' needs and supervisor/senior administrator/dean's (moving forward, referred to as supervisor for brevity) expectations, further heightened their emotional stress levels. One participant, Ruth, illuminated this experience as they reflected on their dean's decision to change the departments' student advising model from 30-60 minutes personalized sessions to 10 minutes:

> We provided a lot more… personalized advising… to get to know the students more… but then our dean was saying that "You need to serve more, like that's not an effective or efficient use of time" … They wanted us to have like 10-minute appointments only with students. And that was also kind of stressful for us because like, okay, well if a student is crying in our office, we're just gonna have to kick 'em out, you know, after 10 minutes! Like, sorry. Usually sometimes we would spend an hour with one student because that's how individualized the advising was like, they would come in and like spill everything to us… but our dean didn't find that effective. (Ruth)

Participants like Ruth described feeling like there did not seem to be a middle ground, questioning, "Like, well, how do you want us to be such a big part of the success of our Students [of Color], but not spend time with them?"

A few participants also described the pressure of dealing with multiple, often coinciding, internal/external academic-related deadlines when understaffed, making workload management challenging. Midori described the depth of their personal struggle in advising both Undergraduate and Graduate Students of Color, stating: "[T]rying to remember the different timelines for the different types of students is, … definitely the part… that is most challenging." Added to this, as participants described, are challenges experienced from trying to accommodate

Students of Color who seek them out specifically or refer other Students of Color to them, thus further magnifying their workload strains.

Several participants (6) also described increased workload strains from having to stay on top of shifting policies and practices**,** especially as these changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Morgan-David for instance, shared how shifting to hybrid operations further increased their workload:

> And in that time, you know, when we were just remote, we were trying to kind of mirror the services that we had provided in person, but in a remote fashion. Um, now that we are working in a hybrid capacity, it feels like we're being asked to do both; like to equally provide services in-person and remotely. And the reality is that we don't have the bandwidth for that, right. We're basically being asked to do way more than we were doing when we were either just in-person or just remote. (Morgan-David)

In other instances, many participants described how despite sharing their workload strain concerns with their supervisor, not much changed, leaving them feeling unsupported. Because their supervisors were disconnected from the work, participants felt like they could not understand the severity of being pulled "in a more million directions" while supporting Students of Color and thus were either slow to address staff recommendations for improving workload conditions, questioned staff's understanding of the situation, or ignored their recommendations. Four participants discussed feeling tired of educating their supervisor on what their role fully entails. For Kenzo this meant that while they are "not here to judge how people got into the roles… but I will say… I have subject matter expertise in working with Students of Color… And a lot of times I think our colleagues, because they're in higher roles in terms of the hierarchy here, they believe they know better [and discount Staff of Color expertise]." Kenzo believed that

supervisors must “learn that they do not necessarily always know better,” and that they need to “rely on subject matter experts.”

Serving as the “catch-all for everything” seemed to trigger real-life negative performance evaluation fears among a few participants. These participants described the compounding impact of this dynamic on their emotional wellness; as Morgan-David states:

> …[I]t's like, it's exhausting to constantly have to explain yourself to someone who's directly responsible for evaluating your performance in this role [too]. Like… something has to give at some point, right? Like, we don't have the capacity for all of this. We never did. We were short-staffed before the pandemic and then there were staffing turnovers during the pandemic…. But you know… something's gotta give. Right? (Morgan-David)

**Supporting Students in Distress**

More than half of the participants (11) felt “Oh, 100% Yeah” that supporting Students of Color experiencing distress heightened their own stress level and impacted their personal well-being (i.e., social, emotional, physical) because they felt like students’ lives were in their hands. Within this theme, most discussed feeling unsure how to manage students’ emotional breakdowns in-the-moment, while a few others mentioned feeling like they “don’t have the answers.” A few participants also described challenges in establishing professional boundaries limiting Students of Color, including those experiencing distress or crisis, access to them after “normal” business hours.

Many participants experienced heightened stress in varying ways while attempting to support Students of Color in distress in-the-moment. For some participants, like Elle, stress experienced from not having the answers:

> Ultimately, you have a student who wants an education… they can't pursue it and they're coming to you to try to figure it out, you know, as an expert, as a supporter to try to support them and figure out their response when there isn't a clear-cut line of what you do. The student now is left trying to [figure out what to do] with no solution. (Elle)

Participants further described how working in student affairs is about being a campus entity whose "goal is to try to figure out solutions" for students in need, however, some also felt like when there is not a solution, then in the end "students are gonna struggle." This reality was difficult for them to reconcile given their role and desire to support Students of Color's educational pursuits.

Javier felt like Students of Color's lives were in their hands whenever they did not have great news to share with them. Like other participants, Javier personally found it "disheartening to have to tell [a student], 'I'm sorry, you don't qualify'" whenever a student for example, is facing an immediate financial crisis or otherwise. They feel dismayed in these situations because "… a part of me… wish[es] I had an answer, or I wish I had a support or a resource." (Javier). On the other hand, other participants sought out different ways to navigate "the system to ensure that… students [are] at least on [a] equal, even playing field as everyone else." Atiya elaborated on extra duties they took on to support Students of Color in distress, stating:

> …whether it was with tutors, sending them to CAPS, or doing afternoon sessions where I would have people from CAPS come… So, trying to create a safe space and letting them know, like, yes, go to class, be that star student, but at any time, if you don't feel that's a safe space, you can come to me. So often that frustration evolved in me wanting to kinda figure out how to manipulate the system that I was in to ensure the students have like, a safe space (Atiya)

While Atiya felt frustrated in their attempt to remove institutional barriers for Students of Color, others, like Elle, described underlying fears that significantly impacted their interactions with Students of Color in distress:

> I always think of like, is this one decision going to affect the student's life in a negative way? And did we play a role in that? And that's the stressful part… if we couldn't figure it out… if things don't work out. We've had students who just never came back, and I wonder, are we at fault for that? Because we couldn't, not just me, but like the university, the policy, are we faulting students who want an education, right? [Students] who are trying so hard to be here, and when we don't give 'em that opportunity and maybe life doesn't go well for them, then are we at fault? That's for me what I think about. Like, did I cause this? Or did we cause the students to have even more challenges in the future? (Elle)

Lastly, a couple of the participants who felt "Oh, 100% Yeah" supporting Students of Color in distress heightened their own stress also described difficulties with setting professional boundaries. They often went above and beyond in their support by ensuring they were readily accessible (i.e., email, drop-in visits, access to personal cell phone number) to Students of Color. Doing so meant these participants experienced increased "workload volumes" and added workload strain from responding to students' after normal business hours and weekends. Terri described how this increased workload eventually led them to set stronger boundaries:

> Just the volume of work. It's so much. And it's like… it's like you're run[ning], you're on a wheel. It's nonstop. You know, students are, are reaching out to you like all times of the day, you know, over the break. They'd be emailing you, you know, sometimes texting,

> you know, and you just, I've learned to have, you know, to create boundaries and say, I'm not responding to you right now… I'm on vacation. It's a holiday. (Terri)

While both participants acknowledged personal benefits in creating this boundary, they also mentioned that it is difficult to consistently maintain them because at times, students' needs are very dire. All participants who fell under this theme described being very invested in helping or advocating for a Student of Color, making it hard to do the "hand-off" to other campus supports because they feel students' lives are in their hands.

### Navigating Institutional Bureaucracy

For eleven participants, navigating institutional bureaucracy (i.e., processes, policies, systems) was a significant job-related stressor. Within this theme, participants shared experiences related to hard-to-reach staff and the tensions between personal beliefs versus upholding policies and practices. I describe each below.

#### *Hard-to-Reach Staff*

For some participants (6), job-related stress was connected to their difficulty supporting Students of Color who were dealing with a crisis or distress because it was often hard to reach staff in other departments. This difficulty was magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic but continued after institutional operations resumed in-person and hybrid. Morgan-David described the intersections between their job-related stress in supporting Students of Color when staff are hard to reach, stating:

> The most stressful parts of our work are when the issues that students are encountering extend beyond our office. And our scope is way more limited because our knowledge base is way more limited. I mean, that's just the nature of the institution, right? Things are really siloed and… there's a lot of just bureaucracy, but like, one of the most

> frustrating things we see sometimes is like, students who again, may have compounded issues, but it's like, they have holds from Housing, they have student accounting holds… in addition to the academic problems, right?… Maybe the academic issues are exacerbated by these other concerns cuz they're like, "Oh yeah, like, well, you know, I was late on my housing payment and then I got sent to collections." And when it's that complex and we don't necessarily have direct lines of contact… we do our best to try and develop relationships with our colleagues in other offices, but there's…. still a certain kind of like, I don't wanna call it a divide cause that makes it sound like it's like a contentious relationship, right? Um, but there are still certain limits to how much we kind of do to advocate for that student in certain situations. (Morgan-David)

Participants who surfaced this issue described feeling extremely frustrated when they were unable to contact other campus offices and departments, especially when they were face-to-face with a Student of Color who was dealing with complex personal and academic needs and seeking support. They mentioned wanting to develop closer ties with these departments because doing so would make it much easier to better serve the student and "help them get back on track so they can finish their degree without as much interruption as possible." (Morgan-David)

***Tension Points: Personal Beliefs vs. Upholding Policy & Practices***

Several participants (7) also reported job-related stress stemming from navigating tensions between their personal beliefs and institutional policies and practices. Many described difficulties in helping Students of Color needing immediate support; recognizing that Students of Color cannot always wait for bureaucratic processes to play out. For example, Elle discussed the tension they experienced from being unable to support Students of Color who do not qualify for an available resource or benefit. These experiences left them feeling demoralized because in

some instances, the available resource may have been the “last hope for the student” and when resources are restricted, they feel “helpless and hopeless.”

For a few of these participants, this tension most mounted for them when dealing with student incidents related to sexual harassment or discrimination/racist acts within the workplace or academic settings. Often desires for swifter action-taking were met with slow bureaucratic delays that impacted their work with Students of Color in crisis. Riley described their tension and frustration with the institution’s resolution process while having to work in-between all parties involved, sharing:

> I'm speaking to the student, trying to support them, as the individual who reported the incident. But then I'm also speaking to the alleged perpetrator of the incident. And then also speaking to the faculty and the director of the program and the dean of students. It took a really long time for this to be resolved… [all the while] this student had to be in a classroom with [the classmate] who had said all of these things… so for me personally, that was very challenging to reconcile; that *why* they couldn't be removed, or *why* we couldn't take any action until it went through. (Riley)

Among participants, some shared that these tensions often “tears [them] apart” inside as they attempt to efficiently support Students of Color in crisis or distress efficiently and try to heed “bureaucratic steps…just to get some semblance of justice for Students of Color.”

**Intersectionality-Related Job-Stressors**

> *You know, it’s like drips of water on wood… or "death by a thousand paper cuts"… "it’s these little things that build up over time and you have to kind of decompress." (Peyton)*

Extant diversity studies suggest that Staff of Color likely encounter inequitable racialized strain from fulfilling duties that fall outside of their official roles and that their White counterparts do not face (Hibbler, 2020; Luedke, 2017). They may also be challenged by the

emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) endured from supporting students with shared marginalized identities (Luedke, 2017). Further, Amado Padilla (1994) describes cultural taxation as the extra burden Employees of Color experience from having additional responsibilities placed upon them because of their ethno-racial background. Thus, as the researcher, I used intersectional theory and critical race theory jointly to construct a comprehensive conceptual lens through which to explore and understand how participants' racial identity, work role and responsibilities intersect. While participants' racial identity is the primary focus, I acknowledge that they also possess multiple social identities (i.e., gender, socio-economic status, ability, sexuality, class) that are likely constantly at play, influencing their reflections on their workplace experiences. This dissertation takes a focus on participants' racial identity as a starting place because it allows for participants' unique encounters with systemic (structural) racism within their work environment, its by-product (e.g., marginalization, oppression), and its subsequent nuanced impact on participants' overall well-being to be identified and explored in conversation with other relevant identities. I explicitly sought to understand the unique ways that participants experienced racialized job-related strain within their role of supporting Students of Color. When participants were asked about work role differences (i.e., racialized strains and stressors), almost all shared that differences existed between them and their White colleagues. As I describe below, participants viewed their race and work roles as intertwined. Further, many experienced mistreatment, micro-aggressive encounters, and cultural taxation, that were mostly intra- and inter-personal versus systemic or structural in nature.

### *I'm a Staff Person of Color Who Works with Students of Color – My Race and Work Role are Intertwined*

For most participants (16) work role and race were seen as intimately intertwined. As one participant said, "Hey, I'm a Person of Color running a space for People of Color." Being a Staff Person of Color in student affairs roles, including student services, naturally positioned them to work with and be impacted by Students of Color's oppressive "ism" experiences too. For several participants (7), their role reinforced their sense of obligation to help Students of Color in crisis because they could personally relate to them, as in, "I am they, and they are me." Elle highlighted the way in which their race and work role are intertwined, stating:

> I'm constantly reminded of how difficult it was for me to try to get an education and to stay in school. At the time there was like no financial aid for undocumented students. And, um, it was a battle. There was like, really nothing... So, I see myself, you know, reflected in students, in their stories, and their challenges [including racialized challenges], and, um, I don't want them to experience or have the same challenges that I did.

For eight participants who are alums of this particular university, intersections between their work role and racial identity are important to highlight because *all* described their strong sense of connection to the challenges Students of Color currently experience while navigating the institution and in their advocacy for themselves or for their community. Participants discussed how they could relate to their students' experiences, with some also noting how some of the same challenges they once experienced as students still exist for Students of Color that they now work with, reinforcing how they see themselves in relationship to their work role. Terri reflects on how their work role and identity are intertwined:

> I was a student myself here at one time. And so the things that I see happening in these Student Communities of Color… for example, their work on anti-Asian hate crimes, Black Lives Matter, you know, that, I mean, that directly impacts me as well, right?... a lot of this stuff relates to me. It's my own life experience… and as an alum, I bring that into the work as well…[T]hat continues to impact us, you know, how that, that empowers and uplifts us… And at the same time, you know, there's still the same issues happening today in terms of being othered, in terms of the discrimination, in terms of not having opportunities available, in terms of us still feeling invisible, you know, all that stuff is, is still going on. So it's, it's like, you know, my role is to show up for my Students of Color… and so I'm definitely invested in working with students, supporting them, and trying to, you know, address a lot of these issues. So, I feel invested in my Students of Color, um, just because I believe in their work and see myself in that work.

Similar to other participants, Elle and Terri purposely choose their line of work to change the experiences of Students of Color, including those who identified as undocumented. Additionally, participants mentioned how important it was for them to be, at least, the "compassionate person the students connect with when they're, you know, navigating these challenges." Participants intentional acts of kindness, compassion and understanding towards Students of Color in distress not only highlighted the dimensions of emotional labor they endured in their role, but as indicated by data analyzed through critical race lens, it further illuminated how their work role (e.g., professional identity) and race (e.g., social identity) are intertwined.

### *Mistreatment*

Nearly half of participants (9) had encountered mistreatment and implicit biases based on their race. They described instances where they either observed or had a fellow colleague mention observing a supervisor treating them differently than White colleagues. Some experienced verbal push-back (i.e., disagreements with viewpoint, discounting ideas) when they attempted to communicate assertively or, biased treatment when they did not uphold others' implicit stereotypes or biases of them. While several other participants described being hyper-aware of times when they were just one of only a few Staff of Color on staff in their department, and a few participants experienced both.

Despite being in a managerial role, Ruth, for instance, often felt like "implicit bias was ever-present" in their work environment. "I felt like I was expected to be the docile, agreeable Asian woman because there weren't very many of us, [nor] People of Color in staff manager positions." Ruth chuckled while recalling this experience, stating, "I even had a colleague who had told me, 'Yeah... [they] treat you much differently than [they] treat me.'" In one situation, Ruth described speaking up to raise concern but was "automatically shut down." Ruth felt like they tended to receive "more pushback than someone else [i.e., a White colleague] who might raise an issue." Experiences like this highlight intersections between Ruth's gender and racial identities and subsequently, although not explicitly characterized as such, may manifest as racialized job-related stress for them. When other participants, like Ruth, reflected on times when they felt mistreated, they often laughed aloud, questioned if they were just being too sensitive, or they forgave the perpetrator because their actions were not "intentional… malicious, or anything."

Several participants endured added emotional strain as they attempted to regain their own sense of psychological safety after a racialized interaction. Although they purposely tried to defy racialized stereotype threats and self-fulfilling prophecy through their actions, they mentioned experiencing mistreatment when their behavior did not match racialized expectations (i.e., stereotypes, implicit biases). Cultural upbringing also made it difficult for some participants to behave assertively or passively in certain situations out of concern of being "looked at as somebody who… sometimes fit[s] that stereotype." In Terri's cultural upbringing for instance, they were not "brought up to speak up against… authority." However, when participants did try to put their cultural teachings aside and speak up, a few described experiencing emotional distress from what they perceived to be again, racialized push-back. For instance, when Terri attempted to push past their own cultural teachings by speaking up to an authority figure, they noted:

> When I do speak out though… I'm punished. So, it kind of reinforces those things, you know? I've been punished for speaking out. I've been punished for being seen as aggressive or unprofessional for that… speaking out in a manner… that is looked at as aggressive. (Terri)

When asked why they felt like they were being treated differently, participants described White colleagues with similar roles who were often openly praised and promoted, despite their own mishandling of similar situations. Tanya for instance, recalled feeling harshly judged by a Black supervisor during a performance review when told, "Why does it gotta be my Black people?" According to Tanya, this meant their supervisor's work performance expectations for them as a Black person were much higher than their White colleagues. It also signaled their supervisor's elevated disappointment in them because their performance reinforced racial

stereotypes; a performance double standard rooted in their supervisor's own internalized racial oppression. This experience left Tanya shaken and feeling unsafe in their work environment. "[This] showed me that they didn't value me the way that I was valuing them. I was putting them, in this department, before my family which is a number-one, no-no."

Tanya said this racialized experience "crippled my optimism," which to them was one of their strongest professional attributes that they "brought to the table" in supporting Students of Color, as such, the experience minimized their sense of "self-worth." Likewise, it triggered future career concerns: "I questioned if I was worthy of becoming more than a coordinator." (Tanya)

***Micro-aggressions***

Among seven participants who described micro-aggressive experiences, five of them specifically described what I refer to as, *"Me Check: Am I Trippin or Did that Really Just Happen?,"* a term I self-defined to mean introspective self-questioning that is connected to micro-aggressive experiences. For many of these participants, this "Me Check" occurred during inter-personal encounters with colleagues or a supervisor and negatively impacted their well-being. These participants were avoided by others, subjected to degrading jokes or comments, and tasked to take on extra work duties due to their race.

For Paris, it was collegial encounters while wearing a mask in the office to help protect others health from their on-coming cold symptoms: "I got so much crap for it from people… and part of me, like, I think because of my identity, I didn't know whether to be like, just embarrassed or to be like, mad. You know what I mean?" During one interaction, Paris became irritated when an older, White male colleague said it looked like they were about to rob a bank. They also noticed how other colleagues stayed far away from them and did not speak to them

throughout the workday. In these moments, Paris questioned if they were "just a little bit more sensitive to things," if "maybe micro-aggressions are happening" but also mentioned wondering to themselves while in the company of other colleagues, "…y'all really not seeing this, like, this is really messed up." While it was difficult for Paris to know what to make of these interactions, they nonetheless took an emotional toll: "I can get like, really angry and… sometimes, I just feel really tired."

Several participants also experienced secondary micro-aggressions. Similar to secondary trauma, I define these as micro-aggressive encounters that participants experience vicariously from witnessing or hearing about Student of Color's experiences, personally relating to it, and being emotionally impacted. To help manage the emotional toll endured participants mentioned needing to talk with friends to help them process their feelings after "hearing micro and macro-aggressive stories from Students of Color" because, as Peyton states, "they really affect me… they affect my optimism or lack thereof." For a few other participants, being exposed to Students of Color's micro-aggressive experiences is somewhat routine, as Andrew shares:

> I get a lot of Students of Color who talk to me about the White professors. We usually have a lot of conversations about micro-aggressions for sure. About, um… something that the professor said or even like one of their White peers said, and I'm like, "Oh my God," you know?

For these participants, they view themselves as "just there, like a listening board" so Students of Color have a way to discharge emotionally. When Andrew was asked if they ever experienced any negative impacts to their personal well-being from supporting students through these encounters, they shared, "I mean, I think for me it's, yes. It kind of goes back to like who heals the healer. Um, I'm trying to figure that out. I don't know who heals the healer."

Another dimension of micro-aggressive experiences of importance are those experienced by participants who self-identify as bi-racial or multi-racial and "white-passing." These participants described the emotional toll of being "othered or discounted" when their racial identity is questioned by other professional staff, with one participant, LaMarr sharing, "everyone always thinks I'm White, especially with my first and last name. Everyone's like, 'You don't have a Hispanic name.'" For LaMarr and other participants, it's the "little microaggressions like that, you know, or, um, or 'I've never seen, uh, Latina as white as you'" that often takes them aback. On the other hand, a few others experienced inter-personal shifts in treatment or questioning of their expertise from colleagues after learning that they were not White. Masako described her interpersonal experience:

> I think when people first meet me, it's always kind of like, I could see that they're trying to figure out like, what are you … I did notice a shift in how some people interacted with me and or addressed me once they found out that I was Mexican… whether it was the lack of trust at that point … or second guess of what I was saying, and or [having to] restate [things], where I constantly had to be like, "Well, no, it's factual. Here's, here's the policy, here's the proof." I kind of sensed it [i.e., the change] or felt that way soon after they found out, like my background. And I might be reading too much into it just because by nature, or culturally, or environmentally we're kind of, um, programmed that way. And I'd say [there's a] weight because as people of color, we tend to have that kind of programming already instilled in us. So yeah, I might be a little unfair in stating that, but that's how I felt. (Masako)

All participants mentioned being shocked that "people feel comfortable to say things like that" and as such, the emotional toll compounds from "a lot of little microaggressions that I, that I, um, face day to day." (LaMarr)

***Cultural Taxation***

Most participants (15) experienced cultural taxation within their role. Everyone described their cultural taxation experiences in deep, internalized ways that ranged from personalization (e.g., "If not me then who"), to navigating role inequity (e.g., asked and assigned work tasks that White colleagues are not), to being compelled to disrupt invisibility within oppressive institutional systems (e.g., advocacy for affinity-group based support services and programs).

For several participants who worked in understaffed departments or where Staff of Color representation was extremely low, this structural issue propelled their "If not me then who" outlook and personal investment in speaking out to disrupt "isms" and promote inclusive support for all Students of Color. For Alice, it was feeling compelled to speak out about their "experience and the experience of… folks with similar [Staff of Color] backgrounds." It was "the little things that can be done to show… allyship to people who are not White" because Alice's "identity plays a role in that work."

Participants were asked to take on a variety of tasks outside of their role responsibilities due to their race, for example being asked to serve on diversity committees, to use their personal image or voice for departmental marketing and branding collateral, for language interpretation, and as a tool for assigning additional caseloads because they share an ethno-racial background with a student. For example, LaMarr mentioned always being the "…point person for everyone who couldn't speak English." Whereas Alice "[got] like a lot of organizational duties, like a lot of… coordinating and calendaring and whatever… with the management team members," tasks

they believed would not have been assigned to them if "I were of a different [ethno-racial] background." Midori felt this way too after a colleague asked if they felt comfortable helping students with fee waivers because they didn't think they could "relate to those students." Like other participants who questioned if they were overreacting, Midori expressed: "And of course my first thought was like, okay, maybe, maybe [they] didn't mean it that way, but… I do feel like that definitely has something to do with my identity."

Many participants also described taxing interactions with White colleagues that tended to surface at the height of national social injustices and racial discord. As one participant shared:

> After the killing of the Asian-Americans in Atlanta, the dean approached me [and was] like, "Oh, can you be on this committee?" … I knew it… it was very clear, you know, why…. I was the only Staff Member of Color… Anything that related to race, even though it wasn't like my area of expertise, I was kind of looked on like, what are you doing for these students? Like, we do have a dean of diversity, equity, inclusion, we have faculty, you know… it all fell on [me] like, "What are [you doing], how are [you] supporting our Students [of Color] in… these times of turmoil and, and you know, racial discord."

Among several participants, especially those who work with or oversee affinity-group based support services and programs, invisibility disruption refers to taxation from, (a) having to advocate for Students of Color for whom one serves and supports on an individual, community, or broader student population level and (b) having to constantly articulate to others the value of this type of work on campus. For some participants, this taxation was experienced as oppressive encounters within a "White, supremacist, oppressive [university] system" that too, have a cumulative negative impact on participants' stress level. It is the "upfront tax of having to

educate others or taking up space" that participants, like Angel, described while reflecting on their work's significance in supporting Indigenous/Native Students of Color, stating:

> This is why a [program] like mine exists, why… [we] are even invested in promoting higher education-because of the stereotypes associated with Indigenous/Natives. And so, um, that is really taxing and takes up a significant amount of my time where I can't even get to do like the fun outreach part because I have to educate first. (Angel).

For Lavonna, it was "constantly trying to convince someone why they should think about us, right? You don't have to give me things, but … you should at least think about us when you're doing something because my students are your students, right?" For Lavonna, Angel, and other participants, they described not wanting to "…have these conversations. And yet the onus is on [them] to have that conversation" because there is an "expected tax on Staff of Color… to be a part of this, because, I don't know why, because no one else wants to do the work because it's expected." (Angel)

While most participants described the multiple ways they experienced cultural taxation within their role, several participants also discussed how their ethno-racial identity and cultural background provides an inherent cultural competency that often made it easier for them to establish trusting relationships with Students of Color – "because they know we get it." For Parker, the "biggest thing for [them] was being able to empathize rather than just sympathize with students," sharing:

> Ya know, given my background as a first generation, Latina student who pursued graduate degree, I'm able to identify with specific populations. You know, the struggle of, how am I going to pay for certain things like housing, or you know, I don't have parents who are savvy in the education system, or um, just like learning about loans… I feel like

> as a Latina, and knowing a lot of friends close to me, who are DACA and AB540 students, I feel like I can connect with… [those students] a little bit better. (Parker)

## Impacts on Health, Wellness, and Well-being

### Well-being Subjugation

The act of well-being subjugation, a term I developed to represent the act of putting one's health needs and wellness practices on hold to support others and/or the department/institution, was an unanticipated theme that emerged in the data. Although this could also be an outcome of cultural taxation endured from job-related stressors, I used this concept specifically to describe participants' conscious decision to put oneself second as a behavioral response to receiving additional responsibilities due to their ethno-racial background and belief that Student of Color's lives are in their hands.

Most participants (17) felt guilty for taking a self-care/mental health day off because doing so would shift workload burdens onto colleagues because of their absence and they were concerned about effectively supporting Students of Color (e.g., having to cancel a meeting with a student who has already been hard to reach, student is in active crisis, etc.). Morgan-David for instance, struggled with taking earned personal time off because their department was understaffed:

> I didn't really feel like I was entitled to take time off because I was like, "Well there's, there's so many shortages in our staffing." Like, it would be wrong for me to do that, right? Like, it would be wrong for me to kind of step away. (Morgan-David)

Like other participants, Morgan-David knew what it felt like to repeatedly be asked to cover another colleague's shift. They did not want to put an extra "burden on other colleagues" just so

that they could have a day off. Morgan-David further expressed an awareness of potential risks to their personal well-being given a prior experience:

> … it was pretty detrimental to my well-being because… I was just exhausted all the time and I would come home from work really frustrated cuz I was like, you know, I, I feel like I'm doing like three people's jobs. (Morgan-David)

Many participants also described not wanting "folks to feel like I was incompetent" because of their race so they took on things, new initiatives, new programs even when they "didn't have the capacity." For a few others, well-being subjugation also crept into family life. For Tanya, this came to a head while they were amid supporting an ailing family member:

> I was literally what I would consider killing myself to take on and juggle and handle everything and being humble. Humble for me is part of the culture. You don't brag, you don't wave your flag on all of the things that you do. You just do them. That's how I was raised. It coincided with a very devastating time in my life when my mom, my best friend, my children's caregiver, was at the beginning stages of [their] diagnosis. I was sickened at the thought that I would work around the clock, in fear that I would come home and find my mom on the floor, you know, at the brink of death. But at the time, my drive was to give my all to this department. (Tanya)

Several participants, including Tanya and those previously described serving in "catch all" roles, also discussed how their well-being subjugating in order "handle everything" took a toll on their health and well-being as a result.

**Well-being Impacts**

When Students of Color were dealing with an immediate crisis, many participants increased their support. For participants, this meant providing personal escorts to other campus

support services, constant phone and/or email follow-up, extended one-on-one meetings, as well as ongoing exposure to Students of Color's traumatizing personal experiences. When asked to describe how supporting Students of Color in these moments impacted their own health, wellness, and well-being, almost all (19) participants described work experiences that indicated compassion fatigue (i.e., apathy, burnout) and 13 described varied emotionally distressing experiences that significantly impacted their overall well-being. Eight participants, in particular, described experiences that could be characterized as racial battle fatigue (i.e., mental, emotional, and physical racism-related strains) and secondary traumatic stress.

***Compassion Fatigue, Racial Battle Fatigue, & Burnout***

In some capacity, almost all participants shared emotions that one may expect from hearing about the trauma or crisis experience of another person. For many participants, on-going exposure to students' traumatic experiences, including racist or micro-aggressive incidents (e.g., with peers, staff, or faculty) in and outside of the classroom, was too much to endure. They described experiencing compassion fatigue in some way in their roles. Participants like Masako described their compassion fatigue as: "I'm just, I'm all in, but my heart is not." (Masako)

For Peyton, they highlighted racialized battle fatigue as they reflected on the cumulative effect of working during a time in the U.S. where racial and social injustice discord is high and their difficulty in remaining neutral in their role as they work to support both Students of Color in crisis and non-Students of Color:

> I'm not optimistic. And, and hearing these stories makes me less and less optimistic, let's put it that way. Does it make you wanna hurt myself or others? No. Does it make me depressed? No. Cuz I just have to kind of live with it. What, what, what else can I do." (Peyton)

Although these participants felt bad and empathized with the students' experience, they also realized the need to compartmentalize their own feelings and create healthier personal boundaries between their professional and personal life. Jay, for example, sighed deeply while reflecting on how they often "get sad when other people are sad" and how they struggled with balancing their own personal needs as they attempted to make sure they were "giving… student[s] the support and what they need." Jay talked about wanting to make sure that the weight of their role was not too heavy on them, yet their reality was the opposite. Jay mentioned feeling burned out at times and not coping well emotionally even after work, because they often worried about their students, "thinking like, well, what else could I, you know, provide for the student?"

***Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)***

Eight participants may have endured racialized secondary traumatic stress as they listened to and worked to support their Students of Color who were struggling with marginalization, imposter syndrome, and belonging. For Midori, their racialized secondary stress was visibly palpable as they began to cry while recounting one situation where they grew increasingly concerned and worried for their students' well-being, after the students stopped communicating with them:

> I feel like sometimes when I'm talking to the Students of Color that I take on… even after I'm done, I'm talking to them [after we meet], I'm talking to other departments trying to, you know, see if anyone has checked in with the student and then I check-in with the student [again]… and then when they don't respond, it just kind of feels like, I'm sorry I'm being a little emotional because, sorry, on one second. Not to get emotional, but, um, I do think that sometimes I do take it on…. there's a student I was helping… This is a

> student of color… I submitted… a case for them to case management and they were helping them, and they just stopped responding to my email… I was like, worried, you know, cause they hadn't responded for about two weeks. I do feel like because of what I have experienced also with like more of like mental health, that I was able to relate to a student. (Midori)

Other participants, like Angel, also described how supporting Students of Color through traumatic/crisis moments "definitely increases my anxiety" because "it's a personal investment." When asked to elaborate, Angel described a mothering/care-taking phenomena (e.g., I must help others) that was seen among several other participants:

> I feel personally invested in my students' well-being, their own personal well-being. And so, there is, I think, sometimes a tendency or desire to want to like, take that away from them and carry that for them so that they can just be students and live fun student lives… without that burden. Um, so when I'm not working, there are a few [Students of Color] that I'm thinking about constantly." (Angel)

Angel's racialized job-related stress/STS and added work strain stems from their emotional labor as they absorb students' struggles to help lessen their emotional and racialized distress "so they can just be students." This experience was conveyed by other participants as well. Although some participants did not outwardly display emotional distress, like Midori, they described using self-care strategies such as therapy, to help discharge built up emotions.

***Medical Intervention***

Another unanticipated theme was the prevalence of medical intervention to help SAPros of Color cope with job stress. Almost half of the participants (8) mentioned seeking medical treatment to help address acute physical health issues, going out on extended medical leave,

and/or witnessing other Colleagues of Color do so. Several stated that their acute personal health issues were directly tied to their job-related stress, including racialized job-stress, with three of them stating that their physician explicitly told them that their condition was a result of stress. Atiya describes factors leading up to their medical treatment:

> While I was at [that department], the stress levels got extremely high, which all ties in, right? Students would come unload. I felt the sense of responsibility, um, the level of expectation of me having to help them. Stress became, like at its highest peak for me, where I did have to take a medical leave. The toll it took on me physically… the lack of taking care of myself, not being able to work out, not eating, right. Skipping lunches cuz, "Oh, I gotta get this done." I ended up having … surgery and whatnot and the doctor said, "Yeah, stress will cause these things to happen." (Atiya)

For other participants, becoming sick was a "massive wake-up call" on how work severely impacted their health and well-being. For LaMarr, it was reaching the point where they could not eat much during the day because "that's how sick I was. I couldn't smell anything else. I mean, my case was really extreme. I had a picc line in my heart." LaMarr described the need to shift their typical "survival frame of mind" regarding work to "going into like, 'Okay, I am, I have to take care of myself now in different ways as well.' It's not just surviving physically, it's now, 'I have to take care of the mental side and the emotional side.'" For Terri, it was when they needed "to take a whole month off just because mental health wise… after a really rough year, I needed, you know, I needed a break." While others noticed that their "health declined in the past two years" and thus the challenges faced at work became for participants, like Kenzo, "the kind of precipitating factor that got me to go to therapy."

## Individual Self-Care and Coping Strategies

While the data indicated that participants engaged in a variety of individual coping strategies during and after work hours, all participants stated that the bulk of their coping strategies are delayed until after-work because heavier workloads kept them too busy. I describe participants' core strategies below.

### Leveraging Social Connections ("Vent Sessions") & Escapism

Participants engaged in a variety of positive coping strategies that supported participants' emotional and physical health, most prominently, those that leveraged social connections and opportunity for escapism.

Most (15) participants mentioned socializing with friends and holding venting sessions either in-person or virtually via Zoom as one of their primary ways to cope. Notably, a few participants described having strategic vent sessions with individuals familiar with their work context. These sessions were extremely important to them after personally experiencing workplace micro-aggressions or hearing about their Students of Color's micro-aggressive or "ism" experiences. Midori's action upon being asked by a coworker to take on an additional task because they could not "relate to those students" and feeling uncertain if the request made was due to their race, highlights this shared experience:

> I definitely went back and… talked to… my [venting] person, and I was just like, "Do you think that was weird to say?" And, um, yeah, she thought it was weird too. (Midori)

A few participants described venting with "other Colleagues of Color [specifically]… who may understand just because they have similar experiences… [which] helps to kind of lift that… weight" (Terri) of intersectionality-rooted job-related stress. Whereas others described how being in a similar boat of "student affairs folks…Dealing with students, with administration,

like everybody gets it" (Jay) offered a natural social network for support. Eight other participants described engaging in escapism activities, including travel, leisurely drives, and mental health days as their preferred coping practices. Among these participants, Atiya's notable escapism was: "I switched jobs."

**Self-help Practices**

Most (15) participants also described using external support from professional therapy and self-help books. Participants described using "laugh[ter] so I don't cry," relying on their faith/spirituality, and "putting on Christian music…to kind of, just up uplift them." A few participants described being committed to an intentional mindset by "maintaining an optimistic attitude that keeps [them] going," practicing mindfulness activities (i.e., journaling, meditation), and using positive self-talk or mantras like, "NO, this is work. Yes, it's gonna be hard. And um, even if I'm thrown into the deep water, I'm gonna use my big floaties." (Atiya)

Some described mental compartmentalization to, as Parker stated, "shut off that part of my work brain, so it doesn't leak into my personal life." For several other participants who experienced "isms," micro-aggressions, or were impacted by hearing about "isms" from Students of Color, they described their navigation strategies as self-awareness, understanding, "honoring their body signals." For LaMarr, their self-awareness was described as "self-evaluation. I can tell when I'm getting burnt out, you know and that's why I'm like, 'Lemme step away.'"

**Boundary Setting**

Half of the participants (10) shared how they set personal boundaries for themselves that focused on taking breaks from checking work email or work calendar from their phone, intentional lunch breaks/eating, or early office closures. Some of the participants talked about recognizing when they are "getting overwhelmed" so they simply just "close their laptop," "shut

the door," or keep a "yoga mat and…yoga ball in [their] office." For a few participants, their boundary setting practices reflect a realistic state-of-mind where all they "really do during the week for self-care is to stop working at a certain time, stretch during the day if [they] can." Or, because hearing things from students who are struggling or relating to what they have experienced, can "be heavy in nature," some participants "choose to not take that home with [them] because I need that emotional bandwidth at home for my child." All ten participants mentioned that setting boundaries did not prevent them from being "sympathetic in a particular kind of way," yet they also "don't fall down the rabbit hole and get lost." Javier explains how not being able to consistently set boundaries has impacted their capacity for care for themselves:

> I've been able to pick up on those patterns, I've been able to then reflect on it and be like, "Okay, what am I, what am I doing to help myself?" And if I'm not doing anything to help myself, then there's gonna be a point where burnout is gonna happen and I won't even be able to support the students. And if I'm at that point, like, what am I, like, what am I really doing? And so, um, so yeah, I had to learn that work-life balance and it's a learning experience to be honest, but I've learned to set those boundaries to be better and feel better, like emotionally. (Javier)

**Physical Health & Wellness Routines and Management**

Among many participants (12), physical health & wellness routines and management was their way to take care of themselves. Physical health & wellness practices included common activities such as exercise, practicing good hygiene (i.e., adequate sleep, bath), personal health "me treats" from nail salon trips to massages, and dancing which Andrew laughingly described as "I twerk, for the revolution." For one participant, Terri, they described coping by taking time out to finally address their health needs and wellness practices, commenting: "all the [health]

things that you delay because you're taking care of everybody else, especially for a woman, you know, a single mother, you know, you're always taking care of everybody else." Several participants also described taking time out to exercise during the day, however, whether this be due to receiving daily exercise email reminders, participating in the campus' free "University Health Initiative," or partaking in "free yoga programs at noontime." While a few mentioned smoking weed, drinking, and partying as their coping strategy, others described on-going efforts to try and improve their eating habits. One participant acknowledged that "emotional eating… was [their] number one thing that [they were] trying to be more mindful about," while another commented on how they "tend[ed] to eat [their] emotions."

Lastly, it is important to highlight a small number of participants who mentioned finding it difficult to engage in self-care coping practices on a consistent basis. Inconsistent practice meant they were unable to find relief, at times, from their job-related stressors which further compounded negative impacts on their health and well-being. As Masako mentioned, "I don't cope well… I wish I magically could or have it in me to like, fully dedicate myself to that." Another participant, Morgan-David, who described having previously engaged in self-care practices shared: "I haven't been really good at this lately, which might be why my personal well-being [is] suffering." For them, they really do enjoy physical activity and they lit up as they described once being "a really avid runner," but since COVID-19 they have not resumed running, although they "would like to resume the habit." A few participants, like Masako and Morgan-David, also mentioned the sheer difficulty of engaging in consistent self-care practice because, "…it is too hard, it's too hard." Reflecting further, Masako mentioned: "Sometimes, I do my best, but most of the time I'd say I don't…which sucks. Which is hard." While these

experiences were described by just a small number of participants (4), it is possible more participants have faced similar challenges, but did not describe them.

## Current and Desired Institutional-Level Actions

In this study I also examined participants' perspective on current and desired systems, practices, and other factors (e.g., self-care messaging) that facilitated or created barriers to their use of available self-care promoting supports during the workday. Their perspectives on what types of supports and resources they might need from their department/institutions to regularly engage in self-care practices moving forward were also explored.

When participants were first asked to describe the forms of self-care messaging they had received from their department or institution, nearly all twenty participants were able to articulate types of self-care messaging, whether direct or perceived, from within their department or the institution. These self-care messages primarily occurred at the supervisor-level in the form of demonstrated supportive acts of caring or what they perceived as fake inauthentic acts of caring. When asked to describe future support needs, most participants identified current and temporary departmental or institutional practices as well as desired systemic changes to help shift institutional or departmental cultures. These needs were consistent with their identified core stressors.

### Supportive Acts of Caring

While participants sometimes felt their supervisor was not supportive at times, at other times, they were. In fact, thirteen participants mentioned feeling "lucky" and "fortunate" to have a supportive supervisor. They described situations when they required care, understanding or encouragement (i.e., "little nudges"), and their supervisor ensured they had what they needed.

For example, Paris reflected on their luck, sharing, “I'm lucky to have… despite some things I've said before… a really wonderful supervisor… they always reinforce like, take time off if you need it.” Paris found this especially meaningful when on one occasion they suffered a sudden migraine attack during a busy work shift and their supervisor’s response of, “Go rest in a dark room. It's okay. You don't have to check email. I won't, I won't Slack you. It's okay,” was experienced as being “so sweet about that.” A few participants who report to executive/senior-level administrators indicated their appreciation for their “huge emphasis on self-care” and being “very pro mental health days.” Alice elaborated on their experience, stating:

> Our executive director doesn't like calling them mental health days. They're just health days. Like, cuz mental health is a part of physical health and… it shouldn't be differentiated. [They] believe that… it's not an “other health.” (Alice)

Several participants also described their appreciation for supervisors who were flexible and consistently supportive. Parker for instance, recounted their struggle as a First-Generation Professional of Color who often found themself combatting their own imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and cultural schemas (i.e., always work no matter what, “even when you’re not feeling well”) and then witnessing their supervisors’ actions, in response:

> I was clearly sick, but I still came into work Monday. My boss was like go home; let me know how you’re feeling Wednesday. Wednesday came around and they’re like just work from home. Take it easy. Um, if you don't have to meet with anybody, or you can reschedule…. it’s fine. Okay, then Thursday came around and I still showed up. They’re like, okay, well, let's see how you get to the day. And then by the time Friday rolled around, I was just like [*placed hands over face & then up into the air*], I was not well, and I still was trying to push through. Can you believe that? [*Shaking head in disbelief*] I

> still tried to push through, and they were like you need to take on the day off. My boss is just incredible when it comes to prioritizing your physical well-being, and also your mental health. (Parker)

A few participants described feeling supported when their supervisor forwarded mass emails for upcoming health-related campus programs or supported their participation in campus programs, including Riley who did a staff fitness program "for a number of years" and said their supervisor "very much supported and understood that's what I was doing."

Some participants who had moved into new management roles that required them to now report to more senior administration described noticing the shift in support and care they now received when compared to their prior supervision. For instance, Lavonna described what shifting reporting lines meant for their sense of self-care encouragement:

> I get way more like, you should take care of yourself now than I did when it was like at lower levels. They don't care if I'm in the office or not, as long as the work gets done, who cares. Right. But I think…my boss now asked from more of a compassion standpoint of like, are you okay? Do you need something? And before it was like, well you're in this role of crisis response, so let's make sure you're not gonna like, die. (Lavonna)

Other participants specifically described the impact of having a supervisor who not only encouraged staff self-care, but also modeled self-care behaviors themselves. This modeling encouraged participants to "give themselves permission" to take a break to care for themselves. For Midori, it was having a supervisor who both modeled self-care behaviors and encouraged them to take as much time as needed for an upcoming mental health appointment:

> My manager was like, “Hey guys, I'm taking a mental health day.” And, you know, there would be times where I… had to like, reschedule one of my… in-person therapy appointments. And I was telling [them] like, “I'm gonna have to leave early, but I could come back,” and [they were] like, “No, just go.” So, I do [and they do] it. (Midori)

Overall, supervisors’ actions seemed key to encouraging participants to take time out to care for themselves. Perhaps particularly because participants were willing to subjugate their own needs to meet the work demands of supporting Students of Color with a history of trauma or crisis, this permission feels particularly important.

**Fake, Inauthentic Acts of Caring (More Than Just Workers)**

Some participants (5) also described how self-care messages communicated by their supervisor and/or their department culture felt inauthentic or did not meet their actual needs. While this theme represents a smaller group of interviewees, it is still notable because it serves as an important contrast to the previous theme in order fully understand the experiences of SAPros of Color. Participants talked about “double messaging” from their supervisor. Meaning, although self-care was encouraged, when participants took the time off (i.e., mental health day), they were later judged and/or penalized in some way. Tanya described how double messaging is experienced for them:

> Take it - But when we give you time. Take it - When we make time for you to use it. Take it - You've gotta take it, but don't go now. Take it - You've taken it? Oh no, please don't! I need you to take care of this. This is urgent! Take it -You're sick? How convenient, you're supposed to be in the office today. Because it's one or two days of the week that you're supposed to be here, and it just so happens that you're sick again on this day.

For Tanya as well as other participants, this form of double messaging fostered a sense of personal insecurity, distrust toward their supervisor, elevated their job-related stress by keeping them on "high alert" and thus often dissuaded them from engaging in some self-care behaviors during the day or simply taking time off. Whereas for other participants, double messaging led some participants to not only feel uncared for, but dehumanized, as Kenzo concluded, "You can give your life to the institution, and you can fall down and die tomorrow and two weeks later it was like you never existed." Like Kenzo, Javier described wanting to be shown that they are truly cared for and seen as more than just workers, but "seen as human and not just like production machines. It's always gonna be helpful, rewarding, and yeah, I think it changes [you] when, when a workplace sees you as a person."

While a few participants acknowledged that their supervisor and/or department encouraged self-care practice by way of leadership-led "fun activities," some preferred sustained activities versus one-off activities events, which meant for some:

> If we're saying that we need to have self-care, then we need to build it into the week, make it a part of the practice and not just something that sounds good coming out of someone's mouth. (Tanya)

For these participants, they described these activities as safeguard "efforts to show" that a supervisor and/or department "do care for staff well-being,", as further elaborated by Lavonna's experience:

> I mean… they like to integrate fun into the days. They'll be like, have a fun day. But yeah, that's not really self-care. I feel like that's more like, we should do this because we don't want people to say that we don't do self-care. (Lavonna)

One common issue described among these participants was that these acts of caring offered "no real practical solutions, including structural change from within the workplace, its culture, and/or division." For Terri, their desire for structural change meant:

> Self-care feels like something that employers do for employees without changing whatever system it is to actually, you know, kind of prevent some of the stressors… you know, those things are impacting employees in terms of… diminishing wellness, you know? (Terri)

Terri suggested that if Staff of Color health, wellness, and well-being was more of a focus "then this whole self-care thing doesn't seem so much like a very superficial thing." Other participants echoed these sentiments in terms of their hope and wish that self-care practices within organizations were "more promoted in a way that's like substantial. Not just like, oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Do the self-care and yeah, do it." (Masako)

**A Built Environment with Self-Care Practice Embedded**

Over half of participants (11) described their desire for an enhanced built environment whereby a culture of self-care and related values are interwoven into departmental and institutional systems, policy, practices, and where support resources are easily accessible. For participants, instituting structural changes like these were viewed as critical steps to shifting the current "go-go-go" work culture, that many participants described as stressful, to one where self-care is normalized and Staff of Color feel more supported and inclined to engage self-care practices throughout their workday. Participants mentioned several institutional or department changes that would be supportive, including easier use of sick time for personal time off or Family and Medical Leave, department-initiated breaks built into the weekly workday schedule, and the availability of affinity-group counter-spaces for social connection and healing.

A few participants for instance conveyed their dismay regarding the lack of ease in using sick time as personal time off that does not require a doctor's note (versus vacation time) to address one's mental health, as expressed by Midori: "I feel like the university really [does not] make it as easy… it's like frowned upon to take mental health days, you know?" According to them, taking personal time off is often framed solely in terms of physical health or temporary physical disability contexts, and may require a physician note to return to work. Participants mentioned how these practices often created unnecessary barriers for Staff of Color in particular, limiting their motivation to engage in self-care practices. Midori elaborated further stating that "in reality, sometimes Staff of Color may just need a few days off" for mental health self-care.

Participants also discussed their desire for a workplace environment that provides affinity-group counter-spaces. These spaces would be institutionalized and well-resourced for Staff of Color to be in community to (a) process feelings ignited from personally identifying with Students of Color' trauma, crisis, or stress from "isms" they experienced and (b) to deal with the after-effects of severe, traumatic social injustice harms locally or nationally (i.e., mass shootings or police killings of Person of Color). For participants like Masako, this meant having a space to connect with Staff of Color, whereby formal peer-to-peer connection is normalized:

> An environment where you can be like, "Hey, you know, I'm not feeling the best right now," and then you could talk about it. Not that they're paid to be your therapist… I just want some kind of balance. (Masako)

When one-time opportunities to be in community with colleagues "who were primarily Staff of Color" were available, some participants described feeling extra special because they could decompress a bit and freely talk about their job-related stress associated with supporting Students of Color with a history of trauma/crisis.

Standardized office closures for lunch or administrative "catch up" and department-initiated breaks for social connection were important to all participants who fell under this theme. A few of them discussed once having organized breaks by their department that they found, "really, really supportive" but since the practice has been discontinued, it is "one of the things [they] do miss." LaMarr smiled as they recalled what these self-care practices had meant to them:

> We…have a snack table in the office… we would all stop and close the door for like 15 minutes. Oh, and just like, talk and socialize and not about work, just kind of like laugh… just tell funny stories, you know… For a while we would do like 15 minutes of yoga together. (LaMarr)

In addition to these desired institutional and departmental actions, some participants identified current actions that support their capacity to manage their job-related stress from supporting Students of Color in distress including flexible work schedules (i.e., remote and/or hybrid), access to employee assistance programs, and having flexible department structures that were responsive to participants' workload strain (i.e., autonomy to take work breaks as-needed, reassignment of responsibilities, new staff additions, etc.).

Lastly, several participants further identified their need for institutional and departmental actions that disrupt structural inequalities by first addressing SAPros of Color's basic needs (i.e., higher wages/wage parity, job stability, greener work environment, affordable childcare that's equitably accessible and prioritized like faculty, affordable housing closer to the worksite, an equitable hybrid work schedule). Such actions were described as foundational to facilitating their positive well-being as these "would lessen the stress [participants] feel at times" and therefore allow them to have additional money to put towards well-being programs and services (i.e., pay

for out of network therapist, massages), engage in leisure activities (i.e., travel), and receive health promotive benefits from working within a greener workplace (i.e., office with natural sunlight). Elle's sentiments further illuminate these desired supports:

> For a very long time I couldn't afford to live closer to [work]….sure I had this great job and I was making some money, but I still feel like very low income. And so I commuted an hour and a half each way. And so that really impacted, you know, my mental health. So just equitable salaries, a even career versus contract [position]. Those are things that impact, you know, folks and constantly thinking about what their next step is and… if they should be worried about staying or having, um, a job the following year…. If was able to make more money in my position, I would be able to feel justified in taking more off. Which, I feel like I should just do it now, um, just take more days off. But it really does come down to finances. I don't want to say that I will only feel comfortable spending more time prioritizing on myself, if I felt like it wouldn't backfire. But that's kind of how I feel.

## Conclusion

In summary, study participants experienced a variety of job-related stressors, including intersectionality-based stress. Three workload-related stressors that had the greatest impactful toll on participants' health, wellness, and well-being were from department infrastructure dynamics, supporting students in distress (i.e., feeling like "student's life is in my hand"), and navigating institutional bureaucracy (i.e., stress from hard-to-reach staff, stress from navigating tensions between personal beliefs versus upholding policy and practices). Inter/intrapersonal dynamics related to differentiated treatment from White colleagues (i.e., mistreatment, micro-aggression, culture taxation) were also a dimension of these stressors. This impact was

compounded by providing support (i.e., support services, advocacy, etc.) to Students of Color who are either experiencing and/or have a history of trauma and/or crisis. Participants experienced compassion fatigue, burnout, STS as outcomes. The degree to which participants engaged in self-care practices to help mitigate these stressors harmful effect on their well-being varied by individual action-taking, access to available or desired departmental or institutional self-care promoting supports, and capacity to navigate institutional barriers for self-care engagement.

# CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

## Overview

Although some studies have explored student affairs professionals' (SAPros) well-being, they are often limited and even fewer have specifically examined SAPros of Color's overall well-being. Considering that SAPros continue to experience moderate to high levels of burnout symptoms (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Naifeh & Kearney, 2020), SAPros of Color's workplace experiences and stress-related coping strategies is critical to understand as many are responsible for supporting an increasingly large number of Students of Color who may have experienced trauma and/or crisis (American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 2019; Frazier et al., 2009; Lynch et al., 2020; Read et al., 2014). My research sought to contribute to existing knowledge by exploring SAPros of Color at a large research institution and their job-related stressors, including the manifestation of compassion fatigue, vicarious secondary trauma (STS), burnout, and indicators of racialized role strain. Additionally, it sought to understand how they then cope, and the institutional/departmental systems, practices or supports that facilitated their capacity to cope. I focused on the following research questions to support this inquiry:

- RQ#1 - What job-related stressors, including racialized job-stressors, do SAPros of Color who support/may have to support Students of Color experiencing trauma or crisis, experience, if any?
- RQ#2 - What strategies do SAPros of Color use to cope with their job stressors?
- RQ#3 - What current and desired institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports, if any, do SAPros of Color need to best cope with their job stressors?

- RQ#4 - What current institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports facilitate or create barriers to SAPros of Color use of these supports?

In this qualitative study, a total of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted from December 2022 through January 2023 with SAPros of Color, including direct student service professionals. These interviews offered participants the opportunity to share deeply personal stories regarding their work environment, its subsequent impact on their health and wellness, and their self-care strategies used to help them positively cope during the workday. This research strategy provided me, as the researcher, the opportunity for enhanced learning by centering SAPros of Color's voices within the study and gain deeper insights into their experience in supporting Students of Color in crisis. This final chapter provides an analysis of the research findings, drawing connections to previous studies. It also addresses the study's limitations, discusses the implications for practice, and concludes with recommendations for further research.

## Summary and Interpretation of the Findings

My study provides a deeper insight into SAPros of Color's workplace stressors and coping strategies. Study findings also highlight institutional needs, such as systemic change to structural policies and practices that broadly influence both institutional and work environments for which SAPros of Color operate within and are critical to supporting SAPros of Color's holistic well-being, capacity to thrive in their role, and ultimately their retention. Based on an analysis and interpretation of these data, I summarize my findings below by category: (a) job-related stressors, (b) self-care coping strategies and institutional-level supports, and (c) desired institutional-level actions needed. Together, these categories answer the research questions that guided the study.

**RQ1: What job-related stressors, including racialized job-stressors, do SAPros of Color experience who support/may have to support Students of Color experiencing trauma or crisis experience, if any?**

The first research question aimed to learn about the job-related stressors, including racialized job-related stressors, that SAPros of Color face in supporting Students of Color, including those with a history of trauma or in crisis. As I discuss in this section, while numerous stressors emerged, department infrastructure dynamics and intersectionality - racialized work-related stress were most prominent among participants. Findings from this study align with prior student affairs studies that suggest a relationship between student affairs professionals' work environment and well-being (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Jackson-Preston et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Naifeh & Kearney, 2020). While even fewer studies explore this relationship among SAPros of Color specifically, findings from this study further seek to extend prior diversity research focused particularly on Staff of Color's work experiences (i.e., systemic 'isms and biases, inequities, cultural taxation) within higher education environments (Hibbler, 2020; Luedke, 2017). Applying an intersectional theoretical lens also allowed me to center participants' ethno-racial identities and voice in relationship to their work environments, intersecting oppressive or marginalizing experiences, and support of Student of Color, thus further illuminating the layered complexities associated with their capacity to fulfill their helping profession's responsibilities and their job-related stress.

**Department Infrastructure Dynamics.** Department infrastructure dynamics: understaffing, low Staff of Color representation within departments, ineffective policies and practices, and unilateral leadership decision-making, were job-related stressors most identified by participants. According to participants, these dynamics subsequently influenced how they

then supported Students of Color, including those with a history of trauma or in crisis. The findings from this study suggest that, as with their White counterparts, infrastructure dynamics play a large role in the work-related stress SAPros of Color experience. These findings also align with existing studies indicating that department infrastructure dynamics like these play a key role in student affairs professionals' job-related stress and hence, negatively impact their well-being (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018). When in play, these dynamics may trigger increased workload burdens, thereby increasing SAPros job-related stress more generally (Jackson-Preston et al., 2023; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018).

Given that student affairs is a helping profession, study participants have had to wear several hats: community-building, student mentor, confidant, parental-figure, student advocate, first-responder, cultural competency representative or diversity and inclusion educator, academic or career advising. Despite the added workload pressures and work role strains imposed, these are generally normalized practices within their respective workplaces. Earlier studies have shown that serving as a campus resource and advocate for students' holistic well-being and resilience while also fulfilling other assigned and unassigned role responsibilities can often conflict (Jackson-Preston et al., 2021). As such, these professionals' personal capacity and resources may be exceeded (Jackson-Preston et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2016). Morgan-David's reflection illuminates this very struggle:

> "Like, we don't have the capacity for all of this. We never did. We were short-staffed before the pandemic and then there were staffing turnovers during the pandemic…. But you know… something's gotta give. Right?"

My findings also suggest that, within these infrastructural dynamics, racial/ethnic representation is an added layer that makes participants' work role and workload burdens more unique, complex, and cumbersome than their White counterparts (Luedke, 2017; Quaye et al.,

2019). Low SAPros of Color representation has meant that Students of Color in general or during a crisis, tend to seek them out specifically and more often (Luedke, 2017; Jackson-Preston et al., 2021), or refer other Students of Color to them. All the study participants felt like they had to be the "catch-all" for everything as they worked to balance these workload demands. While infrastructure dynamics was a major theme throughout the interviews, when explored in conjunction with participants' race/ethnicity and low Staff of Color representation, these factors impacted participants' well-being in the form of racialized job-related stress.

**Intersectionality - Racialized Role Stress.** Intersectionality theory provides context for understanding the interconnectedness between participants marginalized ethno-racial social identities and their interplay with workplace and racialized job-stress experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Lavaysse et al., 2018,). Beyond just impacting their work responsibilities, their racialized job-related stress and role strains created added tolls on their physical and socio-emotional well-being. For instance, infrastructure dynamics specifically related to low SAPro of Color representation within participants' work environment imposed added work role strains and workload burdens on them because Students of Color overwhelmingly sought them out for support.

Prior research also reveals that underrepresentation, conceptualized "as being as being one of few from one's cultural group in a population" also creates added "strain felt by the individual having this experience" (West, 2015 as cited by Jackson-Preston et al., 2023). Study findings contribute to this extant literature by demonstrating how SAPros of Color's racialized job-stress is not only connected with low SAPro of Color representation within their work environment; additionally, sometimes being the "only one" whose race and professional role are tightly intertwined spawned inter/intrapersonal mistreatment, micro-aggressions, and cultural

taxation experiences. These findings further confirm much of what prior research has discussed on systemic institutionalized racism and hostile "chilly" campus climate experiences among Professionals and Students of Color in higher education (Hurtado, 1992; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano et al., 2002) that further feelings of marginalization or are oppressive in nature.

The breadth and depth of SAPros of Color's cultural taxation is of particular interest. All participants described a myriad of extra responsibilities placed upon them, as they were often positioned as Staff of Color representatives on university committees, unofficial diversity consultants, or liaisons between the university and ethnic communities during times of socio-cultural discord (Padilla, 1994). Throughout the study, participants described over and over how these taxing experiences manifested, heightening their work-related stress and negatively impacting their socio-emotional well-being. One participant, for example, described being asked by a White colleague to help support a Student of Color in crisis because they did not think "they could relate to those students." For another it was having their race brought up during evaluative moments, and being told, using the colloquial phrase, "Why does it have to be my Black people." The findings suggest these othering interactions are harmful to participants' mental psyche, heighten their stereotype threat response, and require them to instantaneously assesses if they are "just being too sensitive," or as previously discussed on page 66, rhetorically ask themselves, "*Me Check: Am I Trippin or Did that Really Just Happen?*"

At the same time, participants deeply personalized and internalized their cultural taxation experiences as a responsibility badge. For fifteen participants in particular, their beliefs reflect what I describe as "If not me, then who? I am they, and they are me" perspective. This perspective seemed to strengthen their sense of obligation to help Students of Color, including those in distress, because they could relate to them, shared a mutual identity, or held a common

oppressive institutional experience (Hibbler, 2020; Quaye et al., 2019). In fact, some participants also revealed being alumni of the study site. The fact that some of the same challenges they once experienced as students still existed for the Students of Color they were now working with only further reinforced how they viewed and enacted their role responsibilities within their current department infrastructural dynamics context. In most instances, participants described often going above and beyond to remove institutional systemic barriers so Students of Color, especially those with a history of trauma or experiencing a crisis, could "just be students."

For some, taxation from going above and beyond rose above traditional role-defined responsibilities and services for students. Their added taxation included the mental, physical, and emotional work that occurred outside of these role boundaries. Efforts like self-initiated check-ins (email, meetings), impromptu check-ins occurring while passing by in the hallways or on campus, communicating outside of regular hours, or the emotional load from continuously thinking or worrying about how to further help a Student of Color, especially in times of distress.

The importance of recognizing other impacts on SAPros of Color' health and well-being cannot be overstated. When Students of Color were dealing with immediate crises, many participants increased their support. In turn, most appeared to subjugate their own well-being by putting their own health needs and wellness practices on hold. However, some literature suggests that participants' behavior may explained within a cultural context that emphasizes selflessness and putting others' needs before their own (Adkins-Jackson et al., 2023; Becker et al., 2003). This cultural dynamic might have also made it difficult for participants to prioritize their well-being out of guilt feelings or a sense of obligation. Risk of racialized stereotype-threat further influenced participants' willingness to engage in self-care activities during the workday, as some "don't want folks to view them as incompetent." For some, it is also worth mentioning that the

co-existence of other intersecting marginalized social identities (i.e., age, gender) could have also compounded by this concern, although these were not explicitly explored or mentioned by all participants in this study.

Notably, SAPros of Color who work with Students of Color with a history of trauma or crisis have an increased likelihood of ongoing exposure to students' traumatic experiences, including racist or micro-aggressive incidents, which can be too much to endure (Alarcon, 2021; Jackson- Preston et al., 2021; Jackson-Preston et al., 2023). Findings from this study are consistent with previous research—though limited, this work indicates that compassion fatigue, racial battle fatigue, secondary traumatic stress (STS) and burnout are well-being impacts experienced by student affairs in general and more uniquely for Staff of Color (Hibbler, 2020; Jackson-Preston et al., 2023).

The occurrence of medical intervention sought by SAPros of Color to address severe acute and chronic physical health issues, and participants' need to go out on extended medical leave (or witnessing other Colleagues of Color do so) was a notable unanticipated study finding that extends current literature. While stress and burnout are often pointed to as common reasons student affairs leave the profession (Mullen et al., 2018; NASPA Compass Report, 2022; Tull, 2006), supporting SAPro of Color's self-care behaviors and actions via broader social ecological approaches operating a multiple level (e.g., individual, intrapersonal, community, environmental, structural and systems polices and practices) to mitigate the onset of more serious illness becomes a more essential responsibility for departments and the institution more generally. This is especially pressing, as participants commonly discussed waiting until after work to engage in self-care practices, if at all, to address job-related stressors, including racialized stressors.

Understanding when and how participants engage in self-care practice is crucial to highlight because being mentally, physically, emotionally drained throughout the day without time for a reprieve can impede their ability to effectively support Students of Color' holistic well-being. In essence, how can SAPros of Color be expected to continue to pour into and support Students of Color' holistic well-being when their own internal resources are too drained? One participant's experience exemplifies this, stating: "I'm just, I'm all in, but my heart is not." The emotional labor, akin to "mothering" (Hochschild, 1983) – the listening, helping students navigate their challenges, that is required of participants, seemingly in response to the departmental infrastructure dynamic pressures they face, like workload distribution, is simply unsustainable given the risk for more severe adverse health outcomes for SAPros of Color. While difficult, these challenges are not without solutions (Chessman, 2023).

**RQ#2 & 3- What strategies do SAPros of Color use to cope with their job stressors? What current and desired institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports, if any, do SAPros of Color need to best cope with their job stressors?**

The second and third research questions explored participants' self-care strategies and institutional supports used to help them cope with their work-related stress. As mentioned above, department infrastructure dynamics, coupled with participants' intersecting ethno-racial background (including marginalizing and oppressive experiences), seemed to elevate participants' work-related stress, role strain, and when unaddressed, some participants experienced adverse health outcomes. Consistent with prior a study from Jackson-Preston et al. (2023), participants coped by engaging in variety of self-care strategies (e.g., leveraging supportive relationships for social connection, setting boundaries, self-help mindfulness

practices, physical and emotional health promotion, leisure activities). However, these strategies are often delayed until after-work.

Unsurprisingly, findings suggest that participants' overwhelming workload from being in "catch-all" roles greatly limits their access to extra free time and even when it is available, participants' tend to subjugate their own well-being needs by prioritizing the needs of their department and Students of Color who heavily rely upon them. Ultimately, what participants described as most supportive was having more time, which they believe would be accessible if their department addressed understaffing and SAO of Color representation. For some participants in particular, quitting/resigning from their job represented their best form of self-care practice. Collectively, these findings are important to reemphasize since workload, SAPro burnout, and attrition from the profession is strongly associated within prior student affairs retention and attrition studies (Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2006).

My findings highlight the importance of leveraging social connections among other SAPros of Color, as well as Staff of Color in general, during the workday. These connections play a vital role in their self-care management by providing a valuable outlet for support, to "ki-ki" (socialize) together, or simply have a safe counter place where they can feel acknowledged, listened to, and humanized. Furthermore, these social connections may help participants alleviate the considerably heavy physical and emotional strains that arise from dealing with daily racialized work-related stressors (Husband, 2016; Jackson-Preston et al., 2021; Solorzano et al., 2000; West, 2017). This is particularly relevant when participants are faced with an intensified sense of community responsibility as a Person of Color to support Students of Color, especially in times of distress. In such moments, participants often feel a Student of Color's life is "in their

hands." Thus, these social connections provide them with a pathway for sharing the load and finding solace within a trusted community of others "who get it."

Lastly, participants most appreciate supervisors who demonstrate *authentic acts of caring* (e.g., personalized check-ins, sharing health-related resource and upcoming program information), are *supportive* (e.g., flexible, encouraging), *demonstrate self-care values through personal behaviors* (e.g., role modeling time off/mental health days, takes breaks, reasonable work shifts), and *promote self-care through sustained structural change* (e.g., periodic office closure, work performance evaluation plans that center self-care, consistent messaging). However, it is important to note that there is no one-size-fits-all employee wellness model that campus directors and leaders could adopt to support SAPros of Color' overall well-being. Regardless of the strategies employed, it is crucial that they are well-resourced and sustained. Findings suggest that inconsistent acts of caring, ingenuine concern, and merely offering one-time self-care fun-day activities, like all-staff events, free lunch/drinks, is insufficient and runs the risk of being perceived as inauthentic and performative, done simply to tick off a to-do list. One participant's reflection further illuminates this finding:

> Self-care feels like something that employers do for employees without changing whatever system it is to actually, you know, kind of prevent some of the stressors… you know, those things are impacting employees in terms of… diminishing wellness

Participants repeatedly expressed a pressing desire for changes in department and institutional infrastructures, policies, and practices that foster manageable workloads and a greater sense of humanization (Jackson-Preston et al., 2023; Wyatt et al., 2021). These changes were viewed as essential to truly support SAPros of Color's self-care practice, overall well-being and retention. These desired changes appear to be in alignment with Bronfenbrenner's social ecological framework as well, for they reemphasize how interactions between, and

interdependence of, multiple factors operating at multiple levels - personal (i.e., biological, psychological), organizational/institutional, environmental (i.e., both social and physical), and policy level – within and across the study site's entire ecosystem (Rimer & Glanz, 2005) could influence participants' self-care-taking behaviors as well as cultivate an environment that promotes SAPros of Color's holistic well-being by addressing environmental factors (i.e., workplace stress, social interactions with others) creating structural change through broader, system-level health promotion policies and practices.

**RQ# 4 - What current institutional/departmental systems, practices, and supports help facilitate or create barriers to SAPros of Color use of these supports?**

Research question four further sought to explore the additional institutional supports SAPros of Color participants say they need to cope with job-related stress, including racialized stress, moving forward. The findings overwhelming suggest that current supports previously discussed in RQ# #2 & #3, are the same ones desired by participants as they continue their professional role within their department and the broader institution. A consistent theme among participants' response was a stronger need for extrinsic support that operates at an environmental and systems-level. This refers to infrastructural changes that embed self-care into policies and practices, rather than focusing solely on the intrinsic motivations, behaviors, and capacities of participants. Bronfenbrenner's *Socio-Ecological Model* (SES) (1979) captures these very needs precisely, offering a systems-settings level framework for promoting and addressing the well-being needs of SAPros of Color's across multiple settings in which they may interact. The SES model acknowledges the importance of systemic changes and interventions for supporting SAPros of Color within their larger contexts.

For participants, instituting structural changes like these were seen as crucial to transforming the current "go-go-go" work culture and infrastructure dynamics that perpetuate inequities, which seemingly disproportionately burden participants. Many participants described these dynamics as stressful and felt that such changes could foster a culture where self-care becomes normalized, and SAPros of Color feel more supported and inclined to engage in self-care practices throughout their workday. In essence, participants are advocating for institutional changes that would create an environment where their well-being is prioritized and supported at every level of the institution, and potentially impacts their life-long well-being as staff currently and thereafter. For instance, higher and equitable salary, job security (permanent vs. contract position), affordable childcare, permanent hybrid work options, homeownership assistance to live closer to work and reduce commute time, and self-care practices that are structurally embedded into daily operations across all departments reflected basic dimensions for optimal wellness, that if addressed, would significantly impact their capacity to intrinsically engage in routine self-care practice. The Eight Dimensions of Wellness model (Montoya & Summers, 2021) is one such model that visually conceptualizes participants' basic needs, recognizing their overlap and affect on individuals' quality of life, longevity, overall well-being.

## Implications for Practice

The findings of this study make important contributions to the body of knowledge on SAPros of Color job-related stress, including racialized stressors, experienced from supporting Students of Color with a history of trauma or in crisis. These findings fill the research gap in understanding how these stressors manifest, impact socio-emotional well-being, and what self-care strategies are used during the workday to cope. As I discuss in this section, there are notable implications for organizational and institutional practice. For instance, findings collectively point

to the need for integrating a culture of self-care that is systemic and sustainably embedded within all institutional strands. During a time when many institutions face growing financial, enrollment, staff turnover constraints (Chessman, 2023), the findings also point to the need for a critical examination of workplace infrastructures, policies, and practices, that too, may be influenced by similar aforementioned constraints, and foster workplace inequities and biases that disproportionately impact SAPros of Color. Impacts that heighten SAPros of Color's workload burdens and role strains. Thus, as the researcher, I am purposely placing these implications on the shoulders of departments, organizations, and institutions primarily to minimize adding more implications onto SAPros of Color's already burdened shoulders from working with Students of Color, especially with those with a history of trauma, or in crisis.

**Foster a Culture of Self-Care at Department, Organization, and Institution Levels**

Two central goals of this study were (1) to elevate the work experiences and voices of SAPros of Color who support Students of Color, including those with a history of trauma or in crisis and (2) to understand how they cope with associated job-related stress, including racialized stress, endured from providing this support. Findings strongly suggest that the institution, flowing down to the supervisor, can do better by SAPros of Color who may struggle with integrating self-care practices into their daily workday routine by institutionalizing an authentic culture of self-care and support. Congruent with the Social Ecological Model, this would require a multi-faceted approach whereby campus leaders articulate institutional values on self-care, and normalize discussions around it, job performance, and overall health. These values should also be reflected in and guided by institutional policies and practices (e.g., personal time off for mental health self-care and does not require a physician note to return to work). Establishing self-care strategies as a collective institutional responsibility (and not just the responsibility of an

employee wellness program), also means integrating self-care principles into campus mission statements and strategic plans, which would allow self-care to be seen as integral to the institution's identity brand. Ultimately, this would mean that SAPros of Color would encounter supportive departmental or institutional mechanisms that help keep them accountable to engaging in self-care practice, and campus departments, organizations and the entire institution would equally be expected to explicitly honor wellness of Staff of Color.

The importance of this implication is reinforced by data from the mental health and health psychology literatures, which have documented meaningful associations between People of Color's exposure to racism, micro-aggressions, and other forms of oppression within one's work environment (or society generally) and their mental health (i.e., depression, sleep disturbances, headaches), behavioral health (i.e., lower work performance), and physical health (i.e., higher blood pressure). Changing current policies, as participants recommend, could further de-stigmatize seeking mental health care and reduce the deleterious impact of racism and discrimination on participants' mental health. It would go a long way to institutionally recognize "racism as a social determinant of health" (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021), and place mental health care in alignment with all health needs requiring flexible mechanisms that support time off. With less than fifty percent of college presidents and chancellors reporting that they are very aware of the mental health condition of their staff (Inside Higher Ed, 2023) these actions may reinforce for participants, that not only is self-care acceptable, but it is encouraged and supported.

**Create Dedicated Self-care Spaces and Programs**

As previously discussed, participants prioritize leveraging social connections for self-care. Being in community with others offers them a supportive environment in which they can vent concerns and feel supported by others who allow them to feel seen and heard. Campus

leaders may consider earmarking funds and allocating other resources to institute counter-spaces dedicated to SAPros of Color and other marginalized staff groups. Doing so further might further signal to SAPros of Color, including study participants, the institution's awareness of their unique work experiences associated with racialized job-stress and role strains, and thus the vested interest supporting their daily self-care and well-being overall. Dedicated counter-spaces not only provide opportunities for participants to gather, but also engage in wellness programs, activities, or to just simply relax. However, these options also require leaders to ensure that staff have unencumbered access.

Lastly, department and institutional leaders also need to take pro-active steps to create peer-to-peer mentorship and network opportunities that allow participants to connect with others who may share similar experiences related to work-related stress, role strain as Persons of Color. In fostering a culture of self-care from the top and throughout the institution, campus leaders help create healthier, more authentically supportive work environments for SAPros of Color. In turn, SAPros of Color may experience enhanced job performance and role satisfaction, improved health outcomes, and improved capacity to support Students of Color's holistic well-being.

**Tackle Department and Organization Infrastructure Dynamics Head On**

As the findings pointed out, systemic biases and other inequities embedded within department infrastructure dynamics may disproportionately affect SAPros of Color participants' work experiences in unique ways than their White counterparts. These differences may manifest as disparities in workload burdens from supporting Students of Color, decision-making power, recognition of work contributions, and intra/interpersonal mistreatment or microaggressions. As these differences intensify, they may promote a hostile work environment and lead to heightened frustration, sense of mistrust, or concerns regarding one's value to their department.

Addressing these infrastructure dynamics requires bold leadership committed to taking proactive steps to extinguish these effects on SAPro of Color long term. Department leaders should consider implementing recurring workplace climate assessments to measure workload distribution among staff teams and redistribute the work, as necessary, to promote more equitably balanced workloads for all staff. Additionally, assessing SAPros of Color's well-being through one-on-one discussions or polls can help supervisors detect signs of role overload and burnout earlier, to step in, and provide support. Other structural changes like, including self-care priorities and guidelines in employee manuals, reviewing self-care guidelines during staff on-boarding and staff trainings, or discussing self-care expectations during performance evaluations are just a few examples of creating a built environment nested within a social ecological framework, that embeds self-care into its policies and practices.

Leaders also play a pivotal role in cultivating work environments that are inclusive and supportive for all staff members, and in particular SAPros of Color staff when lower staff diversity exists. This means addressing issues related to mistreatment, microaggressions, cultural taxation, and isolation that may emerge. In forging trustworthy relationships, leaders can help promote open communication where SAPros of Color can share their experiences and feel supported by knowing actions will be taken to address their concern. Also, understanding that SAPros of Color' culture may intersect with their willingness to engage in self-care practice during the day, leaders should work to de-stigmatize self-care by offering counter-perspectives/messaging that communicate that taking time off for self-care is not only valued, but encouraged, and does not suggest anything negative about their competence nor role commitment.

Equally important, retain hybrid work schedule as they may help reduce how much SAPros of Color feel overwhelmed with excessive workloads by offering time away from the office for uninterrupted, focused work. Doing so allows for a flexible work schedule and role flexibility. Additionally, integrating scheduled office closures for lunch, administrative catch-up, team development or self-care, may make it easier for SAPros of Color to engage in self-care activities that can be done during this closure with less concern or sense of guilt.

**Leadership – Personal and System-level Change**

Lastly, cultivating an inclusive environment that disrupts department infrastructure dynamics means leaders must also commit to hiring more staff and although not explicitly stated, redistributing other resources, to minimize workload overload and burnout for Staff of Color. As findings suggest, these were two key contributing factors which impacted participants' job-related stressors, including racialized stressors. Additionally, department to campus-level leaders can take steps to ensure their own leadership professional development trainings and programs integrate education on self-care, its importance, and how it advances the university mission and values. As mentioned earlier, assessing staff well-being through one-on-one meetings, polls or workplace climate surveys are practices supervisors and leaders can use to address infrastructural dynamics, thus integrating self-care into leaders' own professional development is a foundational first step. This may further encourage supervisors or leaders to role model their own self-care practice, which as the findings suggest, participants found supportive to their own self-care practice. When supervisors and leaders role model self-care, it can send a powerful message regarding the departments or organization's values and help foster a healthier, more empathetic work environment, and ultimately retain Staff of Color.

## Limitations

While my study's findings add valuable SAPros of Color socio-emotional well-being and self-care experiences to extant student affairs and diversity study research, it did have limitations. Although findings are not generalizable to all SAPros of Color, including direct Student Service Professionals of Color working for public research institutions, findings do extend our understanding of their job-stressors, racialized job-stressors, self-care coping strategies during the workday, and additional institutional supports that may foster self-care moving forward.

One study limitation was the sampling process which may have attracted participants who participated because they knew me, or were already experiencing symptoms of compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, or burnout and thus were motivated to discuss how their work intersects with their socio-emotional well-being. As such, the emergent themes identified could have potentially been influenced by this bias. Despite this potential challenge, using both convenience and snowball sampling were essential to ensuring a large enough sample with key characteristics as much as possible. Further, the process may have also attracted participants who worked in roles solely dedicated to working with Students of Color or encouraged sample homogeneity if participants reached out to peers from within their department or line of work to participate. Since participant selection criteria did not seek to control participants' work role or location, this too may have influenced the emergent themes. Additionally, my identity as a long-term SAPro of Color who had individual professional relationships with some participants may have impacted how participants interacted with me. Some may have said less than they would have to an unknown researcher; some may have felt that there were "right answers" and tried to

give them. What's more, my identity may also have impacted how I reacted to participants' stories or may have primed me to interpret them in specific ways.

The study also overwhelmingly sampled individuals working in departments that were under resourced in terms of number of staff and Staff of Color. While this may be a finding (e.g., that so many departments are under resourced in this way), it did prevent the study from identifying effective strategies for supporting SAPros of Color. Further, the study's interview protocol construction primarily assessed for participants' ethnicity/race, which created a singular lens through which to reflect upon and share their perspective. This approach made it challenging for participants to separate their intersectional identities or think about their experience through just one facet of a prismed identity, especially if they held multiple marginalized identities. This may have further influenced their perspectives and outlook regarding the ways in which their racial identity intersected with their work role and job-related stressors, in particular those that are racialized in nature.

Lastly, the study reflects experiences of individuals at a public research institution that geographically is situated in a predominantly liberal, progressive locations whose campus values may lean more closely as well. Thus, the experiences of individuals that work at an institution with differing characteristics or geographic location may differ.

## Recommendations for Future Research

As the findings suggest, lack of time due to participants' workload burdens spurred by infrastructural dynamics is one common factor that impacts their self-care practice. Therefore, future research may benefit from exploring institutional resources and wellness programs that are tailored towards SAPros of Color as well as those that are accessible during the workday. While addressing these infrastructural dynamics requires a real commitment to structural, systemic

change by institutional leaders, identifying low-hanging fruit strategies to address SAPros of Color's time constraints could potentially serve to further promote their self-care practices and help mitigate the effects of job-related stress they encounter. This researcher recommends conducting affinity-group and mixed focus groups with SAPros of Color and supervisors.

In addition, identifying institutional organizations and departments that have successfully created built environments embodying self-care through its values, policies, and sustainable practices is worthy of further exploration. This research would require analysis at a systems-level to understand how these institutions or departments' best practices effectively center and integrate self-care within their operations to cultivate a workplace environment that is inclusive, supportive, and humanizes of SAPros of Color. In essence, as a built environment that positively impacts and sustains SAPro of Color's health and well-being at work and at home.

Future qualitative or quantitative research focused on SAPros of Color who work in well-resourced departments (i.e., fully staffed , diverse Staff of Color representation proportionate to Students of Color served) located in institutions that vary in size and geographic location, could further broaden our understanding of the type of job-related stressors they experience, their self-care practices during the workday, and institutional/departmental supports that promote and/or inhibit their self-care taking behaviors and practices. Having an even more nuanced understanding of SAPros of Color's job-related stressors, including racialized stressors, and self-care taking behaviors and practices may arm institutional leaders with rich data that can be used towards informing broader structural change, including shifts to policies and practices (i.e., operational).

Since supervisor relationship and self-care role modeling appeared to also influence participants own self-care practices, future research targeting supervisors who supervise SAPros

of Color is also recommended. This research could explore their understanding and perception of SAPros of Color's work role strains, the needed forms of support, and actions they've taken to promote their holistic well-being via qualitative interviews and qualitative surveys. This research would also be worthy of exploration in particular, given the opportunity to gain valuable insights in promoting SAPros of Color's well-being from both a setting and systems lens.

Since the time this data was collected, there have been additional threats (e.g., shifts in DEI legislation, laws and legal protections across federal, state, and county/city lines) that already have or likely will impact universities and colleges' diversity plans, student population diversity, curriculum design, funding of DEI-related programs and services, and retention of positions which many SAPros of Color may have occupied. As demonstrated, these very staff play a critical role in supporting Students of Color, and they may be even more worried about their career's future. Future research should also the potential impact of this political climate on SAPros of Color, and whether there is vigilance among SAPros of Color who support Student of Color generally and those experiencing distress. Vigilance, in this context refers to the level of care, commitment, and SAPros of Color's personal choice to remain in their role or in higher education despite the work environment conditions.

## Conclusion

As a result of this research, I became even more inspired by Student Affairs Professional of Color's commitment, as helping professionals, to supporting the well-being of Students of Color generally and those dealing with trauma or crisis. These staff members represent the glue that is integral to student retention, persistence, and life-long well-being. They are the seed oil which allows institutional gears to continue to operate and thus be positioned to boast about their student graduation rates, and overall rankings. They are the ones who truly sacrifice, in many

respects, their whole being - mentally, physically, emotionally to student affairs and student services. Thus, while it is important for campus leaders to be aware of SAPros of Color's work-related job stress and role strains experience, what is equally important, it to not assume that the added burdens these create, are easy to bare, despite the optics of it all. As one participant thoughtfully shared, "Who heals, the healer?" While seemingly a rhetorical question, the answer is not an elusive one. Promoting SAPros of Color's holistic well-being so they can "heal" is not solely an individual responsibility. As illustrated by the findings and within this discussion, institutional leadership is critical, and it goes beyond acknowledging strategies to promote SAPro of Color's self-care taking behaviors by requiring a commitment to infrastructural change and the development of flexible, reflexive strategies that impact the site's entire ecosystem in a sustainable manner.

# APPENDIX A

## Interview Protocol

### *LitRally Spent: Student Affairs Professionals of Color, Socio-emotional Well-being, Coping Strategies & Self-care Practices*

**Introduction:** Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today about your work experiences and self-care coping practices. I want to point out a few key things before we proceed:

1. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experiences as a Student Affairs Professional of Color (SAPro of Color) and potential job-related stressors (including your work role stressors, racial-related role stressors, and secondary trauma stressors associated with supporting students of color, in particular those experiencing trauma/crisis) and explore the ways in which you may engage in self-care practices. If at any time, you feel uncomfortable discussing a topic, or simply do not have experience in a particular area, just let me know and I can move onto the next question.

2. The information gathered in this interview will be analyzed in aggregate and reported out in dissertation form. Individually identifying information will be kept confidential.

3. The interview will be recorded so that I can accurately capture our conversation. Further, you can ask to stop the recording or interview at any time. Additionally, please know that your mental health and well-being is of the utmost importance, so if desired, a list of available well-being resources can be provided.

4. I anticipate that the session will last between 45-60 mins. If we start to tangent, I may bring us back since I appreciate your time and we only have an hour.

5. Any questions for me before we begin?

**Warm-up**

1. Tell me, what is your job title? What department do you work for and how long have you worked there? Where does your department sit organizationally - student affairs, academic affairs, other?
2. What are some of your main responsibilities in your position and/or programs that you oversee?
3. And if you're comfortable sharing, as a SAPro of Color, how do you self-identify in terms of your racial/ethnic identity/identity/ies?

## Key Questions

**Work outlook & Role Strains**

*[Reference]* ***Personal Well-being Defined****:* Positive self-report of physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and economic welfare; domain and life satisfaction, engaging work, and feeling good overall. (Source: Health Related Quality of Life, n.d.)
*[Reference]* ***Social Emotional Well-being Defined****:* Social emotional health is the ability to understand and manage our emotions and to form social connections and relationships with the world around us. Strong social emotional health enables an individual to integrate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a way that supports greater health and well-being in life. Source: *https://thrivingschools.kaiserpermanente.org/mental-health/social-emotional-health/*

1. What are the most rewarding aspects of your work?
2. What is/are the most challenging (e.g., stressful) aspect/s of your work, in general?
    a. *Probe*: Are any aspects of these challenges (e.g., stressors) directly related to [*or due to*] how you serve and support students, in any way?
    b. [*Tentative Probe*: What adjustments has your workplace made, if any, in order to serve students in response to the COVID-19 pandemic? *Do any of these adjustments overlap, in any way, with the work challenges that you mentioned?*]
3. As a SAPro of Color….
    a. How does your racial/ethnic identity/ies intersect with both your work role/s, if at all?
    b. So… When you think about how your racial/ethnic identity/ies intersects with your work role…. do you feel like this ever affects your personal wellbeing too (i.e., social, emotional, mental, physical, domain specific satisfaction, sense of fulfillment, feeling good overall), if at all?
        i. Probe: And how about your work environment/culture… do you feel like it (e.g., work environment/culture & race) intersects with your personal wellbeing in any way, if at all?
4. Given what you've just shared, (as a SAPro of Color) how do you think your work role (and/or work responsibilities) differs from colleagues who may be of a different race/ethnicity than you, if at all?
    a. Probe: Ask ONLY IF they don't speak to this "race" in the previous question: What about any (assigned/unassigned) tasks or responsibilities expected of you [or taken on by you] because of your race/ethnicity?
    b. Can you describe any additional strains or stressors placed upon your role because of your race/ethnicity?

*TRANSITION: Thank you. Ok, I'd like to transition us to a deeper discussion about your personal well-being.*

**Impact of Challenges on Personal Well-being**

5. Earlier you mentioned how your work role/s [X] and race/ethnicity intersect and [how this therefore] impacts your personal wellbeing…. are there any other ways you feel like your personal wellbeing is impacted [that you'd like to share]?
    a. How do you then cope?
6. In what ways, if at all, is your personal well-being impacted while supporting and/or delivering services to Students of Color; especially those with a history of (or may be experiencing) trauma/crisis?
    a. Probe: Are there other personal/professional challenges or barriers that come with supporting and delivering services to students of color with shared identities; especially for those with a history of trauma/crisis?
    b. IF they ONLY MENTION POSITIVE impacts on wellbeing (i.e., chance to help them), ask: Ever experience any negative impacts to your personal wellbeing [from supporting and/or delivering services to these Students [of Color]?

    *[Reference]* ***Crisis/Trauma Defined***: crisis (e.g., academic, unmet basic needs or financial, etc.), or interpersonal or non-interpersonal trauma (e.g., discrimination, micro-aggressions, etc.), or a traumatic event (e.g., sexual violence, abuse, severe mental health/personal health episode, death of a loved one, or natural disaster, etc.)

**Deep Dig 2: Self-care Promoting Workplace Culture**

7. Are there any other personal OR professional challenges or barriers that come with supporting and delivering services to Students of Color with whom you share an identity; especially for those experiencing trauma/crisis or with a history of trauma/crisis?
    a. Probe if needed: Do any aspects of [X] then impact how you then serve and/or support these Students (of Color), in any way? Any Examples?
    When you think about the term self-care, what does self-care mean to you/how do you define it in the context of your workplace?
    b. Ask them to clarify, where necessary.
8. What impact has shifting to virtual or hybrid student service support and/or programming had on your personal well-being, if at all?
9. When you think about the term self-care, what does self-care mean to you/how do you define it in the context of your workplace?
10. What messages, if any, have you received from your supervisor/executive leadership regarding staff self-care?

*TRANSITION: While some staff are able to integrate self-care practices within their workday others may engage in practices outside of work. In the next few questions, we are going to talk about your self-care practices.*

**Personal Self-care Practices**

11. You mentioned above that self-care means [insert XYZ]. With that definition in mind, in what ways do you engage in self-care practices to help you cope, if at all?
    a. If they DON'T, ask: I'm curious, please tell me more/elaborate
    b. If they DO, ask:
        i. Describe some examples
        ii. How often do you practice?
        iii. What process/mechanism do you use to ensure that you take time out for self-care practice
            1. Probe: How about ***during the workday***?
            2. Probe: What current or desired departmental/institutional processes/mechanisms/available supports, if any, do you use to ensure that you take time out for self-care practice to best cope with your job stressors?
    c. All (if applicable): Have you ever faced barriers to engaging in your own self-care practice
        i. Probe: How about ***during the workday***?
    d. What support or resources from your workplace/the institution would best impact your ability to take time out for your own self-care practice moving forward?

*TRANSITION: Ok, we're nearing the end here, I have one last question I'd like to ask:*

**Managing Self-care Practice Barriers**

12. Can you give me a specific example of when you found it difficult to engage in self-care? (Skip if examples were given in 11c)
    a. Probe: What did you do, if anything, to take care of yourself during that time?

*TRANSITION: Ok, we're nearing the end here, I have one last question I'd like to ask*

13. What support, practices or resources from your workplace/the institution would best impact your ability to take time out for your own self-care practice moving forward?

***Close***

*Thank you for participating in this interview. What else do you want me to know about your self-care practices/workplace stressors, coping practices, workplace supports/barriers that I have not yet asked you? Or, what other questions do you have for me before we end today?*

*Thank you again [Insert name] for taking time out to share your self-care experiences and practices with me. I truly appreciate your trust in me to speak so candidly.*

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