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Defining and Operationalizing Equity-Centered Assessment

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Abstract: The discussions on the intersection of equity and assessment continue to expand in higher education, spanning from the inclusion of critical theory (DeLuca Fernández, 2015; Heiser et al., 2017) to a continuum of philosophies (Lundquist & Henning, 2020), and finally to embedding equity in assessment practice (Lundquist & Heiser, 2021; Henning et al., 2021; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). This article contributes to the ongoing conversation by (a) offering a transparent definition of equity-centered assessment, (b) providing characteristics of equity-centered assessment in practice, (c) giving examples of equity-centered assessment in Student Affairs, and (d) providing a theoretical framework for operationalizing equity-centered assessment.

Keywords: equity, assessment, student affairs, methods, positionality

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Discussions on the intersection of equity and assessment continue to expand in higher education, spanning from the use of critical theory to shape assessment work (DeLuca Fernández, 2015; Heiser, Prince, and Levy, 2017) to a continuum of approaches beginning with causing harm and moving towards assessment for social justice and decolonization (Lundquist & Henning, 2020) to embedding equity in assessment practice (Henning et al., 2021; Lundquist & Heiser, 2021; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020) and using assessment findings to increase equity in higher education (Heiser & Lundquist, 2021; Heiser & Milligan, 2021). Assessment processes seek to facilitate continuous improvement and include components of identifying outcomes, providing learning opportunities, selecting and applying methods for measuring outcomes, analyzing data, reporting and sharing results, and using these results to foster change. Given the central focus of students in the work of student affairs practitioners, student affairs professionals and our close partners in higher education are uniquely positioned to engage in assessment practices which center the lived experiences of historically underserved students, to challenge policies and processes which foster inequities, and to champion a better future for students by leveraging data to advance equity. As such, this article is designed to be accessible for student affairs and diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners engaging in assessment work as full-time assessment staff, leaders of divisional assessment, those with assessment as a portion of their job, graduate students with assessment responsibilities, or those engaged in cross-functional training. This article contributes to the ongoing conversation by offering (a) a transparent definition of equity-centered assessment, (b) characteristics of

equity-centered assessment in practice, (c) examples of equity-centered assessment in student affairs, and (d) a theoretical framework for operationalizing equity-centered assessment which includes attention to practitioner positionality and power, assessment processes, and higher education systems and structures, each of which need to be considered to truly advance equity. At the heart of this article is a sincere hope to encourage scholars and practitioners alike to create cultures of assessment which foster equity and justice.

Intersections of Equity and Assessment

Prior to the emergence of equity-centered nomenclature and philosophies, the existing landscape of intersections between equity and assessment include assessment and social justice, critical theory and assessment, and cultural responsiveness in assessment. This section explores each of these three intersections within the context of student affairs. Drawing on existing contributions to propose a clear definition of equity-centered assessment currently missing from the literature.

Assessment and Social Justice

Practitioners in student affairs are often encouraged to develop their competencies in core areas of assessment as well as social justice. The NASPA/ACPA competency document states, “social justice is defined as both a process and a goal that includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups and seeks to address issues of oppression, privilege, and power” (p. 30). Central to this definition of social justice are concepts of practitioner skills and dispositions, fostering equity, and addressing contextual factors such as power and oppression. In their work on social justice and assessment, Henning and Lundquist (2018) discuss how past dialogues and skill development in assessment and social justice have been siloed rather than intertwined. They proceed to highlight how culture, philosophical assumptions, and systems of power and oppression are areas of overlap between these two functional areas in the profession.

In their discussion of assessment and social justice, McArthur (2016) looks to policy and procedures as an area where assessment and social justice intersect. McArthur’s (2016) work on assessment for social justice focuses on assessment in higher education and how learning promotes social justice (p. 968). McArthur’s (2016) pushes against “procedural notions of justice” where the ways in which fair treatment of students is operationalized and assessed are shaped by procedures and policies which are implemented under the guise of equity (p. 968). This is a top down approach to fairness based in policy and procedure, which emphasizes what students are learning about social justice from engaging in our processes and procedures at the institutional or organizational level. Assessment for social justice calls into question how our policies and procedures replicate larger, oppressive, societal structures which are problematic and reinforce the marginalization of populations in higher education.

Assessment and evaluation for social justice as discussed by Zerquera et al. (2018) focuses on the process of justice and the inclusion of justice principles throughout the assessment process. Zerquera et al. (2018) write,

> The process for achieving justice is to be democratic, participatory, inclusive, affirming, and collaborative. Thus, as we conceive of it, social justice-focused assessment integrates these aspects of the definition throughout the entire process - in identifying aims of the assessment, in study design, and in how assessment results are interpreted and used to inform change. (p. 17)

With an emphasis on fostering social change, this approach centers on social justice throughout the assessment process and prioritizes using results to inform justice-oriented change. Drawing on the work of the NASPA/ACPA competencies, Henning and Lundquist (2018), McArthur (2016), and Zerquera et al. (2018), it is clear that power, policies and procedures, and the assessment process are critical considerations for assessment and social justice work.

Critical Theory and Assessment

Separate, but related to social justice is understanding *critical epistemologies* which, "center and critique issues of power, identity, and representation" (Phelps-Ward et al., 2017, p. 9). Critical epistemology draws attention to practitioner identity or positionality and the critical examination, not just acknowledgement, of power. Additionally, representation becomes a consideration throughout the assessment process. Critical theory can provide a useful lens for drawing out the potential of assessment in higher education to support transformation towards equity within colleges and universities. Critical theory used for assessment and equity focuses on the key tenets of implicit bias, agency, methodological diversity, power dynamics, analysis, and reporting (Heiser et al., 2017). Key tenets for applying a critical lens to assessment practice include reflecting on practitioner positionality and subjectivity, recognizing the agency and expertise of students, incorporating diverse methodologies, translating from data to information for multiple audiences, and collaborating with stakeholders to shape the entire process (DeLuca Fernández, 2015; Heiser et al., 2017). The intersection of critical theory and assessment adds to the power and policy component provided by the examination of social justice and assessment. Critical theory adds practitioner positionality and identities as critical factors in leveraging data to advance equity. Where social justice and assessment intersections focus on power, policy and process, the intersection of critical theory and assessment highlights positionality, agency, and methodology.

Cultural Responsiveness, Cultural Appropriateness, and Assessment

Culturally responsive assessment centers historically underserved students and their cultures throughout each element of the assessment process (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) write,

> Culturally responsive assessment is thus thought of as assessment that is mindful of the student populations the institution serves, using language that is appropriate for all students when developing learning outcomes, acknowledging students' differences in the planning phases of an assessment effort, developing and/or using

> assessment tools that are appropriate for different students, and being intentional in using assessment results to improve learning for all students. (p.10)

In this approach, notions of culture are more central to the practice of assessment and are woven throughout the assessment process. Students are centered in the process. Where McArthur's (2016) work speaks to systems and structures which impact social justice work and assessment work in higher education, Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) speak more to the process of assessment and how to integrate students, foster student agency, and encourage student-centered, co-created and authentic evidence collection techniques which represent the diverse ways students learn and demonstrate learning.

Culturally appropriate assessment (Johnston & Awanuiarangi, 2010; Slee, 2010) includes both diverse groups of people being served by the assessment practice in the context of the culture of the institution and the practices and knowledge systems of that institution, which tend to be culturally biased towards dominant group interests. In this approach, universities have the responsibility to be proactive in accommodating the cultural differences of their students through situating students in positions of power where they can be involved in decision making and challenging the dominant group's harmful practices. Standard assessment practice reflects external mandates which limits assessment approaches and perpetuates replicating assessment (Wall et al., 2014). Oftentimes, standard assessment processes fail to meet the distinct needs of diverse students. Inclusion must encompass the ability to revise policies and practices that disserve marginalized populations and implement new ones that better serve them. Creating spaces within the institution that specifically serve marginalized students, prioritizing their cultures, and providing teaching and learning environments specifically designed around their cultural practices are key elements. Assessment should account for the uniqueness of specific cultural groups through multiple approaches and indicators that are holistic and culturally reflective. Such approaches should be co-created with stakeholders and enable stakeholders to fully operationalize their agency. Culturally responsive and appropriate assessment approaches challenge practitioners to center students in the work as critical stakeholders rather than subjects of study and reminds practitioners of the power of the assessment process to reinforce harm and perpetuate inequities.

Defining Equity-Centered Assessment

Drawing from the existing dialogue, assessment approaches that intersect with social justice, critical theory, and cultural responsiveness prioritizes the lived experiences and intersectional identities of students throughout the assessment process and addresses the power dynamics, policies, and practices ingrained in the higher education context which shape assessment work. These qualities of assessment position assessment as a process and outcome leveraged to advance equity. Equity-centered assessment leverages the assessment process to foster equity, address issues of oppression and privilege, improve student learning, and reshape systems and structures influencing the environments in which students learn. Through collaboration with students, faculty, staff, and administrators, equity-centered assessment practitioners work to develop the skills and dispositions necessary to collect, analyze, and communicate data that disrupts the status quo and

advances equitable outcomes, policies, processes and systems. The emphasis on continuous improvement is central to traditional approaches to assessment as well as an equity-centered approach. This approach to assessment looks beyond students for the improvement of student learning by focusing on how systems and structures can be dismantled and rebuilt to advance equity, justice, and student success. In 2020, Montenegro and Jankowski proposed the idea of equity-minded assessment and focus on meaningful student involvement, data disaggregation, context specific approaches, and embedding equity in all things assessment. Equity-centered assessment diverges from equity-minded assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020) by moving beyond the thoughtful inclusion of, or attention to, diverse learning experiences and instead locates equity issues, how they are grounded in systems and structures, and how they are upheld or dismantled at the heart of the assessment process. This approach also calls on assessment practitioners to examine their own social locations and how their positionality influences the process and advances equity or propagates harm.

Proposed Characteristics of Equity-Centered Assessment

Equity-centered assessment has six core characteristics: considering the larger motivations and goals for assessment practice, knowledge construction and epistemology, reification of power structures, methodological pluralism, collaboration and voice, and positionality and reflexivity.

Consider the Purpose and Goals of Assessment

The motivations for assessment matter. Dorimé-Williams (2018) centers the goals of the assessment process, "from a social justice perspective" as one that "should be to further an equitable and fair learning environment" (p. 53). The role of assessment goals can serve to enhance the use of assessment to advance socially-just intentions and to truly embrace social justice which requires that the process itself be oriented towards justice. An emphasis on process offers an important differentiation between assessment working within an equity agenda or under the focus of fairness more broadly. Setting assessment goals around equity may emphasize highlighting needs of marginalized students, but does not necessarily integrate them in the process (discussed more later). Socially-just assessment practice "should demonstrate commitment to equity through action" (Bourke, 2017, p.3). Where fairness in assessment may align with general good practice, McArthur (2016) argues that as framed, fairness typically emphasizes "procedural notions of justice: ensuring the right procedures will ensure students are assessed fairly" (p. 968). He argues that assessment goal setting could serve as an advocacy role in ways that are participatory and reflect the needs and voices of those who have been systematically impacted. Thus, it is not sufficient to espouse social justice aspirations in assessment, as the goals of this work must integrate a focus on practice as well.

Historical motivations for assessment work focus largely on responding to external accountability claims, but more recently there has been a shift towards internal curiosity as a motivator for engaging in assessment work. Internal and external motivations for assessment work have implications for advancing equity. Standard assessment practice largely reflects external mandates which limits assessment approaches and perpetuates

replicating assessment that fails to meet the distinct needs of diverse students (Johnston and Awanuiarangi, 2010). Thus, it is critical that socially-just assessment be driven by "internal motivation to determine when, how, why and where their students learn" (Learning Reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience. NASPA-042, 2004, p. 26). A way in which assessment work is pivotal to advancing equity is in completing the process of assessment, first by using data to inform substantive rather than performative change and second by re-assessing to determine if changes had the intended impact. If the goal or purpose for engaging in the assessment process is to address gaps in programmatic outreach, student engagement, or learning, this information can be used to respond to accountability claims and support the success of historically underserved students.

- *Recommendations for Practice*: At the onset of an assessment discussion, ask critical questions about the purpose of the proposed assessment project and how the data will be used, how decisions will be made with the data, and which groups may be impacted. Engage with diverse perspectives to consider the intended and unintended consequences of a given assessment project.
- *Example of Practice*: Assessment practitioners are often content experts and our partners in Student Affairs work are context experts. When working to support the assessment of learning and operational outcomes for a Men of Color student success initiative a group of faculty, staff, and students who led the initiative served as key collaborators and stakeholders in developing the assessment process within this context including defining the purpose of the assessment, the methods used, questions asked, data used, and reporting.

What counts as "knowledge?": Epistemology in Assessment

Challenging dominant epistemological choices, specifically the ways in which different types of information count as true "knowledge" is a core characteristic of equity-centered assessment. As Phelps-Ward et al. (2017) articulate, "limited or absent conversations around epistemology inadvertently communicate an unsettling dominant narrative and value around an objectivist epistemological preference in student affairs" (p 7). In practice, our epistemological frames, and how we generate knowledge, largely influence the ways in which we consider the outcomes of our assessments. Are we designing assessments to be as objective as possible? Such choices may mask the differences in students' lived experiences that may differentially influence their meaning-making processes. Are we providing flexibility to students to allow them to identify the ways in which they want to discuss and demonstrate their learning, or do we hold fast to 'gold standard' standardized and generalizable approaches? Considering what counts as knowledge, what counts as credible evidence of knowledge, and for whom, may better allow students to express the knowledge and skills they have gained from engaging in Student Affairs programs and services. Are we seeking out the stories of students who did not learn from our programs and asking them why, or are we discounting those experiences had by "too few" students to be "valid" or "significant?" Critical information about challenges or successes of our programs may go unnoticed because too few students expressed that viewpoint.

- *Recommendations for Practice*: Revisit and reflect on epistemological frames and incorporate student feedback into the assessment process. Involve students in determinations of what students are learning and what counts as credible evidence of that learning.
- *Example of Practice*: Prior to a four-day study abroad experience for a small group of first-year, first generation college students, the students attend a series of orientations. At the orientations, students identified and explained what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to demonstrate that learning. At a subsequent meeting, the assessment plan including a pre/posttest was shared with students for their feedback and they contribute the additional ideas of wanting to journal and provide video evidence of their learning.
- *Example of Practice*: In assessing an Alternative Break student leaders' ability to facilitate reflection, a rubric, which was constructed with input from past student leaders and shared with those observed prior to its use, administered by the program coordinator and student interns, is used to assess student leaders reflection facilitation skills as exhibited during a training session. The student interns then follow up with the student leaders after the training to debrief the exercise, asking them about the experience, identify their success and areas of improvement, and discuss the scores given on the rubric. Both the more objective rubric and the student leaders' reflection on the experience are used in the assessment of the students' skill in facilitating reflection.

Reification of Dominant Power Structures

Recognizing and addressing the ways in which the assessment process and the cultures surrounding those processes can reify dominant power structures and discourses is critical to equity-centered assessment. Assessment operates within a context that is often political and informed by social norms and values. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) caution that

> Assessment, if not done with equity in mind, privileges and validates certain types of learning and evidence of learning over others, can hinder the validation of multiple means of demonstration, and can reinforce within students the false notion that they do not belong in higher education. (p. 5)

Examples of this practice are: failing to disaggregate data, using demographic questions which are not identity affirming, measuring metrics related to rankings and not incorporating student feedback into the development of meaningful metrics or performance indicators. Failing to disaggregate data is problematic in that considerations of averages bring voices in from the margins and mask underlying differences in the data that may be held by historically marginalized populations on campus, which has a silencing effect. Without critically examining the data from multiple perspectives, assumptions can easily be made that the data captures all student experiences equally well. Advancing equity through assessment attends to and dismantles these assumptions. Defaulting to the same tools (e.g. surveys, focus groups) to evaluate student learning and asking students to demonstrate their learning in the same ways is another way in which assessment can reify that only specific ways of learning and demonstrating learning matter.

- *Recommendations for Practice*: Examine the assessment process and the culture surrounding the process for messages that reinforce dominant discourses and undervalue diverse ways of learning, learning demonstration and measurement.
- *Example of Practice*: A committee of people from across campus representative of the diverse students, faculty, and staff came together to prepare a common set of inclusive demographic questions to be used across campus.
- *Example of Practice*: When defining student success and subsequent metrics, work with students to develop these definitions and measures.

Methodological Choices and Application

Another characteristic is intentionally selecting assessment methods to ensure students have various opportunities to provide authentic evidence of their learning. Assessment methodologies are influenced by a number of factors (what is deemed credible evidence by accreditation agencies, political preferences for statistics or narrative) and may limit the ability of students to provide evidence of their learning, potentially perpetuating inequalities. When selecting an assessment method, practitioners should focus on how it accurately, fairly, and justly collects data (Dorimé-Williams, 2018). Are reasonable accommodations made for students with different needs? Is it assumed that tools standardized on predominantly white populations are effective and accurate measures for students historically marginalized in higher education? Practitioners should explore allowing students the choice of method when measuring their learning, thereby supporting student agency in the assessment process and centering assessment in the student experience (Dorimé- Williams, 2018; Heiser et al., 2017; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). As long as the same learning outcomes and evaluative criteria are used, it is not necessary to apply a consistent method to gather assessment evidence (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) challenge assessment practitioners to consider: "is it that we want students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills or attainment of learning outcomes in a particular way, or that they demonstrate their learning (p. 16)?" Student-centered assessment practices place students and student success at the core of all practices and provide multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, skills, or changes in behavior that have resulted from students' educational experience.

Which methods are used is as important as how the methods are implemented. When deciding to use a survey, creating questions that focus on student strengths rather than deficits, allow for easy responses for English language learners, and are fair and accurate across populations is critical. When using qualitative methods, the design and implementation of focus groups and interviews in ways that honor student cultures and create culturally safe spaces for sharing is critical. One example of this practice is using simple strategies to foster inclusive spaces such as sharing pronouns when facilitating introductions.

Equity-centered assessment practices locate students and their diverse lived experiences at the heart of the process. Incorporating diverse methodological approaches includes incorporating multiple methods, being cognizant of how certain methods perpetuate inequity through their design or emphasis on "majority," and allowing space for voice and

qualitative reflections. Practitioners should focus on ensuring that their selected methods accurately, fairly, and justly collects data from students. After data collection, appropriate use of data should consider how data may be used for political expediency and educators should be cautious in using assessment data as the only motivation for change.

- *Recommendation for Practice*: Use a variety of methodologies to measure student knowledge, behaviors, experiences, etc. Solicit student feedback in the development and use of these methods of data collection.
- *Example of Practice*: Using journaling, video-blogs, and pre-posttest results to capture student learning after working with students to define learning outcomes and assessment strategies.
- *Example of Practice*: After identifying areas of impact for sense of belonging for diverse student populations, hosting photovoice or focus group opportunities to identify in more detail the lived experiences of students.

Centering Student Voice

Often, student affairs staff determine what skills and knowledge are important for students to gain from their programs and services. The importance of seeking feedback and collaboration from students by providing the opportunity for agency and voice throughout the assessment cycle is another core characteristic of equity-centered assessment. By doing so, we are better able to consider different ways of knowing, understand how our programs might influence students with different life experiences than those with which we are most familiar, and increase students' awareness of the learning goals and what is expected of them (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). A key consideration here is recognizing the agency and expertise of the lived experience of the students and building this into the assessment process. This can be facilitated through engaging collaborative processes that encourage cross-institutional collaboration and involvement through assessment design, meaning-making, and implications discussions.

- *Recommendations for Practice*: Solicit student input and feedback when designing assessment plans, instruments, and learning outcomes. Convene a student stakeholder group to review data analysis strategies, interpretations, and action items.
- *Example of Practice*: After coming up with learning outcomes for the Multicultural Office, staff ask the students who engage in the different programs to offer what they learned from those experiences. After students shared what they had learned, the staff members share the learning outcomes they generated and ask for feedback on what they had generated, noting where the learning expectations overlapped with what students shared and highlighting the learning students reported that staff had not identified.
- *Example of Practice*: When working to develop an additional set of questions for a benchmarking instrument, work with student organizations to collect feedback on the items.

Practitioner Positionality and Reflexivity

Understanding and articulating our own positionality is an essential element of equity focused assessment. Our unique positionality can lead to assumptions, implicit bias, and unexamined power dynamics when conducting assessment, perpetuating inequalities unintentionally (Heiser et al., 2017). The importance of critical self-examination as reflection is highlighted in the NASPA/ACPA Professional Competencies under the Social Justice and Inclusion competency area, which encourages Student Affairs professionals to "engage in critical reflection in order to identify one's own prejudices and biases" (p. 30). Once practitioners have reflected on their own positionality they can understand potential impacts when conducting assessment and work to limit these impacts.

Another way in which positionality is integral to equity-centered assessment work is that assessment practitioners can be positioned as experts and often have power over writing the narrative of the data and sharing the results. Translating data so that it is understandable to broad groups and ensuring it is accessible is foundational to assessment work. Assessment professionals should also be cognizant of how interpretations of data findings may perpetuate power dynamics, deficit based conclusions, or silence marginalized voices. Collaborative interpretation of data, equity-centered metrics, and careful disaggregation of data are critical for reducing bias related to positionality and power.

- *Recommendations for Practice*: Engage in critical reflection to understand your positionality, work in committees with memberships reflective and containing members of the student population, incorporate additional perspectives in revising assessment instruments, and include diverse perspectives in assessment design and implementation.
- *Example of Practice*: A student affairs practitioner comes from an educational background where knowledge was solely tested using questionnaires and defaults to using questionnaires to test their students' knowledge. After reflecting on their own positionality, the student affairs practitioner better understands their default and works to incorporate a variety of methods in their assessment of student learning including presentations, videos, and other projects.

A Framework for Operationalizing Equity-Centered Assessment

Assessment work is and will remain highly contextual and political, shaped by the larger socio-economic influences on higher education and calls for accountability. With this politicized context in mind, to advance equity-centered assessment, practitioners must consider their work at three levels: self, process, and systems.

Self

Our practice is embedded and shaped by our positionality as professionals such that "as individual leaders, we practice within norms, assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors originating in our multiple identities….In addition, identity influences experiences and perceptions of power or lack thereof and affects how we think about and practice within power structures of colleges and university" (Chávez & Sanlo, 2013, p. 9). As practitioners

facilitating and engaging in the assessment process, considering equity-centered assessment at the level of self means engaging in critically reflexive work on how positionality and biases shape each step of the process. What interests shape the assessment questions? How is whiteness or a heteronormative lens centered in the process and can this be de-centered? How are findings and interpretations shaped by practitioner positionality? Is there an inherent deficit orientation related to the language used to discuss findings that may be associated with practitioner implicit bias?

In qualitative research, discussions of "self as instrument" are common for encouraging self-reflection as a form of cultural competence to mitigate bias in qualitative research. The same principle of self-examination and competency development to recognize practitioner impact on the assessment process is critical in equity-centered assessment. An additional consideration embedded in equity-centered assessment is a self-determination of whether or not practitioners have the agency to leverage data for advocacy and justice. Not all practitioners feel safe or comfortable doing so and this is a part of the self-reflection work at this level of the equity-centered assessment practice.

Process

The process of assessment, and the context in which practitioners engage in this process, are ripe with opportunities to attend to voice, operationalize agency, shift power dynamics, and leverage data for systemic social change. Practitioners engaged in equity-centered assessment recognize the ways in which the process can sustain or replicate systems and structures which sustain power and oppression and perpetuate gaps in attainment. Practitioners engaged in equity-minded assessment critically examine what experiences are shaping the assessment process and perpetually ask "who is not at the table" or "who needs to be at the table" while identifying purpose, questions, methods, and interpreting findings. How does power shape the process and whose interests are represented (e.g. leadership, employers, students)? Who shapes the narrative of the findings? Is the narrative deficit or strengths oriented when focused on historically underrepresented populations? Equity-centered assessment is an opportunity to foster holistic storytelling through multiple methods of data collection and reporting. As practitioners, it is easy to fall into the trap of routinized methodology out of expediency and efficiency often leaning on surveys; however, a critical consideration in equity-centered assessment is whose voices are highlighted or erased when drawing on averages and using analysis techniques that require large sample sizes. Data interpretation and sharing is also a pivotal opportunity in the assessment process for stakeholder engagement, agency, and voice. Engaging multiple perspectives in the interpretation of findings serves as an mechanism for contextualizing findings within the experiences of the historically underserved rather than perpetually reifying the dominant narrative.

Systems

Assessment as a practice with roots in accountability can perpetuate systems of power and oppression. Addressing this history and how it continues to shape the practice is central in understanding how to approach the work in ways which move beyond mindful attention to equity and towards active dismantling of systems which replicate injustice and inequity. Systems are a necessary part of higher education and supporting systems, such

as IPEDS reporting, could serve as the baseline for students describing their identities rather than the standard. Admissions applications are one prominent way in which institutional databases are populated with data, but what data might be missing that would help us better understand the student experiences (e.g. gender identity, sexual orientation)? Many institutions have mission and value statements claiming to value diversity and inclusion; how are these actualized in a way that allows assessment practitioners to cultivate data to best serve students? Equity-minded assessment calls attention to the gaps in espoused values and the capacity to make data informed decisions to support students who have been historically underserved or erased in institutional data.

Parallel to institutional data and the routinization of methods is the question of how tools for data collection impact the trustworthiness and credibility of our understanding related to diverse student experiences. How have the go-to surveys in the field of higher education and Student Affairs been validated for historically underrepresented students in higher education? What theory undergirds such tools, what are the identities of those crafting the theory and what demographic composed the samples from which that theory was developed? These kinds of critical questions bring to light the extent to which whiteness and heteronormative perspectives are embedded in the profession and subsequently, our assessment work. To be clear, this is not a rallying cry to dismantle every standardized survey in use in higher education, rather it is a call for critical awareness in who these tools serve or do not serve, if they are culturally responsive, and the intended and unintended consequences of historically underrepresented students participating in environments and instruments not designed with them in mind. Augmenting such approaches with approaches that center student voices (e.g., focus groups, interviews, photo voice, video-blogs) creates a picture of student experiences which is contextualized.

Benchmarks, metrics, and key performance indicators are necessary for institutional effectiveness and attending to student learning outcomes over time; however, such measures are often designed to provide information on a population that has never seen or shaped these pieces of information. Centering equity in the assessment process within the context of the systems and structures upheld in Student Affairs in higher education calls for practitioners to create space which, at a minimum, disaggregates and focus group such measures with students. The focus on drawing easy comparisons and efficiently launching measures meant to capture responses by the thousands can come at the cost of silencing historically underrepresented students, normalizing the white student experience and using white students as the standard for comparison. Equity-centered approaches seek to unearth the historically marginalized and silenced to provide a broader understanding of institutional impact and how data can be collected and used to evaluate the systems and structures upheld in Student Affairs and disrupt them to better serve all students.

Conclusion

This paper was drafted with four objectives in mind, to provide (a) a clear definition of equity-centered assessment, (b) characteristics of equity-centered assessment practice, (c)

examples of practice and (d) a framework for adopting this practice. Drawing on the existing dialogues in student affairs related to social justice, critical theory, and cultural responsiveness, a new definition was offered which centers equity in the assessment process. Six areas of equity-centered assessment practice were provided, including: considering the goals and purpose of assessment, epistemology, reification of power structures, multiple methodological modalities, student voices, and practitioner positionality. Recommendations and examples of practice were provided for each of these five areas. Beyond recommendations for practice, the brief ends with three areas of consideration for advancing equity work that are thus far under discussed in the field, including further embedding reflexivity, cultural competence and the impact of assessment professionals' positionality on the process and outcome of assessment. Next, is engaging in critical reflection regarding how the assessment process serves to uphold or dismantle oppressive structures. Finally, advancing equity-centered assessment as a practice involves using assessment practices and principles to examine long-standing systems and structures which support or inhibit student success in order to improve such systems and advance outcomes for all students. Finally, the authors of this brief hope to continue the conversation and encourage others to share their experiences and thoughts on how assessment can serve as a tool to advance equity in higher education.

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"I Have a Few Questions": Reframing Assessment Practice as Asking and Answering Questions That Matter

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Abstract: Student affairs educators are asked fundamental questions about programming and its effectiveness. Stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, accreditors) ask *what* programming (e.g., activities, strategies, curriculum) is offered, *why* it is offered, and *who* benefits in terms of learning and development (e.g., Carpenter, 2001; US Department of Education, 2006). Given these questions are typical and expected, I illustrate how outcomes assessment can be represented as a process of answering common and pertinent questions that matter in higher education. In turn, the assessment process is presented as a valued activity to student affairs educators, not something novel or an add-on. Moreover, a question-answering approach has been shown to be less controlling than direct appeals (Walton & Wilson, 2018), prompting subsequent task engagement (Wood et al., 2016). Therefore, processing assessment-related questions should prompt engagement in outcomes assessment.

Keywords: outcomes assessment, question-behavior effect, behavioral intention

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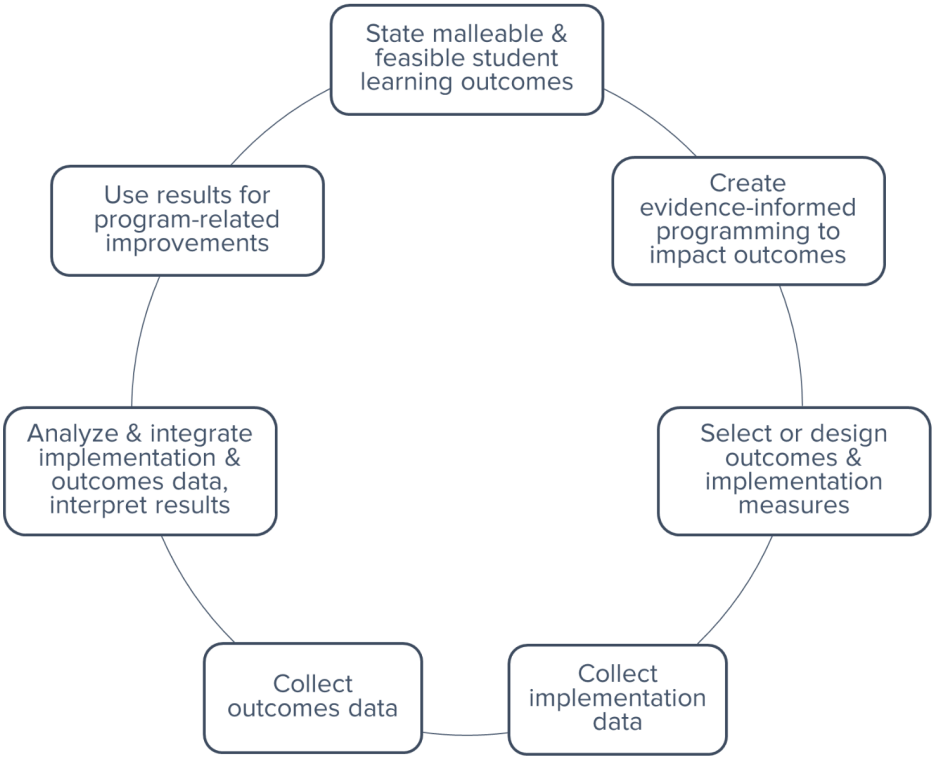
High-quality outcomes assessment can provide evidence of the impact of programming on student learning and development (Evans et al., 2018; Finney et al., 2021; Roohr et al., 2021), which can inform educational programming changes (Ewell, 2009; Fulcher et al., 2014) and policy changes (e.g., changing approaches to roommate matching in housing; Blimling, 2013). One widely noted description of outcomes assessment comes from Suskie (2018, p. 8):

> 1. Establish clear, observable expected *goals* for student learning. 2. Ensure that students have sufficient *opportunities* to achieve those goals. 3. Systematically gather, analyze, and interpret *evidence* of how well student learning meets those goals. 4. Use the resulting information to understand and *improve* student learning.

This description is often further specified figuratively, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

This assessment process may be perceived as difficult or ambiguous to student affairs educators (Bresciani, 2010; Carpenter, 2001). Moreover, the description and figure may not feel personally relevant to student affairs educators. Thus, they may have difficulty understanding, and therefore communicating, how assessment applies to their work or may perceive assessment as an unnecessary add-on (Blimling, 2013), resulting in resistance (Elkins, 2015) or lack of motivation (Levy, 2020) to engage in assessment. In contrast to Figure 1, Table 1 provides questions fundamental to being an educator; thus, these assessment-related questions may be perceived as logical and incredibly relevant to student affairs educators.

Figure 1. *Student Learning and Development Outcomes Assessment Cycle.*



Asking Instead of Telling: Understanding and Motivating Assessment via Questions

Research on meaning making suggests a questions-based approach to outcomes assessment will have great utility for navigating the outcomes assessment process while building value, motivation, and meaning for this work. An individual's behavior is driven by how they interpret or make meaning of a situation (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Two individuals experiencing the same situation (e.g., expectation to engage in outcomes assessment) may make sense of it differently and thus react to it differently. To predict the behavioral reaction, it is necessary to know how people make meaning of their actions and environments.

The meaning one makes of a situation is influenced by the need to fulfill three motives: the need to understand (e.g., make sense of things), the need for self-integrity (e.g., perceive oneself positively, as competent and moral), and the need for belonging (e.g., feel accepted, connected, and valued by others; Walton & Wilson, 2018). Thus, approaches to influence meaning making and, in turn, behavior center on changing people's understanding, sense of self-integrity, and connection with others. In this article, I focus on one technique to influence meaning making: asking questions. Asking questions provides a way of thinking about a concept, process, or situation without imposing meaning, which can feel controlling.

Framing assessment through asking questions is relevant for a variety of reasons. First, working through questions that align with the assessment process allows student affairs educators to explicitly ask why programming is important or if programming is needed

(Eggleston, 2020; Hill & Stitt-Bergh, 2021). Second, asking questions avoids potentially off-putting jargon when learning about the outcomes assessment cycle. Third, by answering fundamental questions about the purpose, design, and effectiveness of educational programming, student affairs educators relay the value of their work, which helps stakeholders understand how intentional programming enhances student development and learning (Bresciani, 2012; Carpenter, 2001). Fourth, by sharing the answers to these questions, educational programming can be better advertised to students and coherently sequenced to address student need (i.e., curricular approach to programming).

In short, conceptualizing outcomes assessment as a mechanism to answer relevant questions guards against assessment being viewed as controlling busywork that is an "add-on" to an already demanding schedule. Because the questions are framed as an enactment of the self (Bryan et al., 2011), student affairs educators should perceive greater utility-value for outcomes assessment (Levy, 2020). As a result, they should feel more in control and motivated to engage in assessment.

Research-Informed Questioning to Motivate Engagement in Assessment

The way a question is structured impacts an individual's motivation to complete the task (Miller & Rollnick, 2009). Below, I outline characteristics of questions that encourage engagement in a task and share questions with these characteristics that align with outcomes assessment. Hill and Stitt-Bergh (2021) shared questions to connect assessment and teaching for faculty. The questions I share (Table 1) were developed prior to reading their questions, are relevant to the work of student affairs educators, and were intentionally created to incorporate the characteristics of motivating questions explained below.

Questions Should Be Framed as an Enactment of the Self

Asking questions that place a person at the center of an important action can invoke positive behaviors according to the action. People want to be perceived as competent; thus, they will take action if they mentally position themselves as the enactor of a positive action (Bryan et al., 2011; Walton & Wilson, 2018). For example, asking a question about "being a voter" resulted in greater voting behavior than asking a question framed as "voting in an election". Noun words ("voter") lead people to see attributes as more representative of a person's essential qualities than action verbs ("voting"). As Bryan et al. (2011) explained, "being the kind of person who votes may be seen as a way to build and maintain a positive image of the self—to claim a desired and socially valued identity" (p. 12653). Using noun-based wording to frame future behavior allows individuals to assume the identity of a competent, valued person ("a voter") by performing the behavior.

Just as being a voter may be a way to claim a desired and valued identity, being an educator or curriculum designer may be a mechanism for student affairs professionals to perceive themselves as competent and valued in this context. Thus, the questions incorporate valued identities versus actions: "educator" versus "teaching"; "curriculum designer" versus "creating curriculum". This framing of questions as an enactment of self is particularly important for actions that are not publicly recognized. For example, voting is a

private activity. Voters receive little or no recognition from others for voting, which may be why many citizens do not vote (Bryan et al., 2011). However, the noun wording offers an incentive to vote: positive self-regard. Like voting, assessment activities are often not formally acknowledged (e.g., Hutchings, 2010); thus, student affairs educators may feel unrecognized for this work. Structuring questions in the context of enactors of outcomes assessment should help student affairs professionals frame themselves as agents of student learning and development.

Questions Should Prompt Respondents to Form Opinions about Utility-Value

Many assessment professionals offer workshops or courses preaching the value and importance of assessment to student affairs professionals untrained or not confident in assessment. The goal to increase the utility-value (i.e., importance or usefulness) of a task is sensible given that higher utility-value is associated with greater engagement in the task (e.g., Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Soicher & Becker-Blease, in press). However, a pontificating approach is not likely to increase the perceived utility-value of assessment. Why? Directly communicated utility-value information on its own undermines performance and interest in a domain for which individuals lack confidence (Canning & Harackiewicz, 2015). However, self-generated utility-value messages have positive effects (e.g., Canning & Harackiewicz, 2015; Soicher & Becker-Blease, in press). Well-structured open-ended questions can prompt student affairs educators to generate their own utility-value messages.

The question approach has two avenues for increasing utility-value. The process described below can be guided by a facilitator. If there is not a facilitator, the Appendix provides a process that can be completed alone or in a small group. For the purposes of this article, I assume a facilitator is guiding the process. First, before providing the questions mapped to the assessment cycle (see Table 1), the facilitator asks student affairs educators to articulate personally-relevant questions that they believe can be answered via outcomes assessment (Step 1 of the professional development activity outlined in the Appendix). This activity makes explicit the self-generated perceived value of assessment. This activity mimics studies where students wrote down their perceived utility-value of mathematics in their own lives. Students who self-generated the utility-value of math had higher gains between pre- and post-intervention math test scores than students who were directly told the value of math (Canning & Harackiewicz, 2015). These findings suggest that having student affairs educators self-generate important questions they believe outcomes assessment can answer will result in self-motivating engagement in assessment. Moreover, student affairs educators can then share their answers with others. By explaining the value and relevance of assessment to others, they are actively engaging in the powerful “saying is believing” strategy, which further internalizes these ideas and motivates behavior (Yeager et al., 2013).

Second, after student affairs educators have articulated their questions, the facilitator provides them with the questions mapped to the assessment cycle (Step 2 in the Appendix). There will likely be substantial overlap between these two sets of questions, which reinforces educators’ self-generated messaging. Next, the facilitator asks student affairs educators to answer these fundamental questions regarding their educational

programming. By answering the questions outlined in Table 1, they must think about their own work. The act of thinking about personal applications when learning about assessment makes the concepts more appealing and engaging, leading to more interest (Canning & Harackiewicz, 2015). When working through the questions in Table 1, many student affairs educators will struggle to provide answers; however, this struggle underscores the usefulness of the assessment process to provide these answers.

Questions Should Prompt Abstract Responses

A third characteristic of motivating questions is that they prompt abstract responses. Open-ended questions allow the respondent to articulate a reasoning process, whereas closed-ended questions encourage one-word deterministic answers (Husain et al., 2012). A question that prompts abstract exploration leads to a deeper understanding of self and the personal relation to the question. An example of prompting abstract responses may be helpful before applying this strategy to outcomes assessment. Abstract and concrete questions were compared regarding their utility to raise self-efficacy in romantic relationships after receiving compliments from a partner. To prompt abstract responses, a group of individuals were asked to explain why their partner admired them and how the compliment was important to the relationship. To prompt a concrete response, another group of individuals were asked to simply describe the compliment and its context. The former group showed greater romantic self-esteem (Marigold et al., 2007; 2010).

Thus, the main questions in Table 1 ask “what” or “how”. “What” and “how” questions prompt answers in the form of a list or a line of logic (Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1984). The sub-questions that support each main question were designed to stimulate further processing and communication of the reasoning underlying their answer to the main question. The sub-questions are primarily formed as “why” and “how” questions because these words prompt respondents to form a rationale for their original answer (Bromberger, 1966; Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1984).

Assessment-Related Questions to Answer

By asking questions that (a) are framed as an enactment of the self, (b) promote utility-value, and (c) prompt abstract responses, student affairs educators should become more motivated to engage in outcomes assessment. Table 1 lists such questions. Each step of the assessment cycle aligns with one main question, followed by a series of sub-questions. An explanation follows as to why these questions matter. Answering this set of questions results in professionals working through the typical assessment cycle, but the relevance of assessment to their work and their professional identity should be enhanced. This enhanced relevance of assessment in turn motivates educators to engage in assessment (Levy, 2020).

In addition to Table 1, the Appendix incorporates the main questions. Specifically, the activity begins by prompting student affairs educators to generate their own utility-value of assessment by writing questions they believe assessment can answer to support their work. In Steps 2 and 3, they process the questions in Table 1 and explain how their

Table 1. *Main and Sub-questions and Their Relationship with the Assessment Cycle.*

Step of Assessment Cycle	Questions (*Main Question in Italics*)	Explanation
1. State malleable and feasible student learning outcomes	*As an educator, what do you believe your students should know, think, or be able to do?* ● What knowledge, attitudes, or skills should students possess as a result of your programming (e.g., curriculum, activities, strategies, pedagogy)? ● How malleable is each outcome? Is the outcome differentially malleable across different student groups? ● How feasible is each outcome given the resources you have (e.g., time, expertise)?	Stating specific student learning and development outcomes that are malleable and feasible begins the outcomes assessment process (Finney et al., 2021). It is from these outcomes that the remainder of the assessment process evolves (e.g., Bresciani, 2013; Sharp et al., 2011). Answering these questions often demands a great deal of time and thought. It is time well spent, as outcomes assessment data have little utility for evaluating program effectiveness if the outcomes are unknown or are vague.
2. Create evidence-informed programming to impact outcomes	*What programming would you, the curriculum designer, create to foster the desired learning and development?* ● Why should this programming (e.g., curriculum, activities, strategies, pedagogy) impact the intended outcomes? ● What evidence (e.g., research, theory) supports the effectiveness of the programming? ● For whom is this programming effective? Should this programming be equally effective for all students? Why?	Educators create and map programming to the intended outcomes. Careful thought should be given to evidence-informed programming that should promote the desired student learning and development (e.g., Pope et al., 2019; Smith & Finney, 2020). Assessment data have little utility for program improvement if programming is not intentionally developed to impact intended outcomes. If educators cannot answer why the programming should impact intended outcomes, it signals the need for more attention to this fundamental question. Particular strategies, activities, pedagogy may be less effective for some students (e.g., first-generation, part-time), which suggests potential equity and inclusion issues. Thus, program rationale should be communicated. Moreover, I strongly recommend indicating your confidence in program effectiveness before implementing it. I often ask, “Would you bet your car that the programming will ‘work’—that the programming will impact the intended outcomes?” For many educators, the value of our car is equal or less than the cost of students’ tuition. If

Step of Assessment Cycle	**Questions** (*Main Question in Italics*)	**Explanation**
		educators answer they would not bet their car, they get immediate self-generated feedback on their perceived confidence in the programming, which often results in researching what programming has been effective (Finney & Buchanan, 2021) and, in turn, would result in betting the car. Spending time, money, and energy assessing ill-conceived programming based on hunches and good intentions can result in years of gathering unused outcomes data and a negative perception of assessment.
3. Select or design outcome measures	*As an educator, how would you measure the student learning and development outcomes?* ● What evidence exists that the measure will accurately reflect the intended outcome? ● How does the outcome measure function for different groups of students? ● Is the measure sensitive to program impact? Is it of sufficient difficulty or extremeness to reflect program impact? ● What evidence exists that the measure produces scores that are reliable and foster valid inferences about student learning or development?	Inferences about student learning and development, and, in turn, programming effectiveness will be drawn from data gathered using outcome measures. Thus, careful attention must be paid to how well measures align with intended outcomes, along with the measures' sensitivity to program impact (Bandalos, 2018; Suskie, 2018). To what degree is the outcome measure instructionally sensitive and instructionally actionable? An outcome measure (e.g., test, inventory, rubric, observational protocol) can be selected from previously created measures (Finney et al., 2021) or can be newly designed. I recommend first searching for existing high-quality measures given the amount of time needed to construct high-quality measures.

Step of Assessment Cycle	Questions (*Main Question in Italics*)	Explanation
4. Collect implementation fidelity data	*What evidence would you, the curriculum designer, gather to describe the programming the students actually experienced?* ● How is the designed programming being implemented? ● How aligned is the designed programming (activities, strategies, curriculum) with the implemented programming? ● Are all students being reached as intended? Why would some students receive the intended programming but not others? ● Which parts of your designed programming were implemented well? Which were not? Why? ● Which students were fully engaged in the programming and which were not?	Implementation fidelity is the systematic observation about whether the designed programming is being implemented as intended (Gerstner & Finney, 2013). As stated by Suskie (2018), educators must ensure "that students have sufficient *opportunities* to achieve those goals" (p. 8). It may be that students did not learn or develop because the designed programming was not fully implemented (Fisher et al., 2014). Prior to making claims about program effectiveness, educators must have evidence that students received programming and had the opportunity to learn (Smith et al., 2017, 2019). Implementation fidelity uncovers potential equality issues if all intended students are not offered the same quality of programming. In short, implementation fidelity data are necessary to draw accurate inferences about program impact on student learning and development (Finney & Smith, 2016; Swain et al., 2013).
5. Collect outcomes data	*As an educator, how and when would you collect outcomes data to best understand student learning and development?* ● How is the data being collected (e.g., pencil-and-paper, computer)? ● Why is the data being collected at particular points in time? ● How does the data collection design (e.g., pretest and posttest, comparison group) align with the claims you hope to make about student outcomes and programming effectiveness?	The data collection plan impacts the claims one can make about program effectiveness (Horst, et al., 2021; Roohr et al., 2021; Shadish et al., 2002). Educators determine the mechanism of data collection, such as paper-and-pencil, computer, or rater observation (Suskie, 2018). The data collection environment should be structured to minimize construct-irrelevant variance, such as students expending low effort when completing a measure (Finney et al., 2016). When and from whom the data are collected (only students experiencing the programming or also from students who do not experience programming) directly impacts the claims educators can make about program effectiveness.

Step of Assessment Cycle	**Questions** (*Main Question in Italics*)	**Explanation**
6. Analyze and integrate outcomes and implementation data; interpret results	*As an evidence-informed educator, how would you analyze student learning and development data and interpret the results?* ● How will you integrate implementation fidelity data and outcomes data? ● Why will this approach best communicate students' learning and development? ● To what extent can changes in student learning and development be attributed to the implemented program? Can you make inferences about program effectiveness given the data collected? Why or why not?	The student learning outcomes and the data collection design are the primary drivers of how data are analyzed (Roohr et al, 2021; Shadish et al., 2002; Suskie, 2018). After choosing and conducting analyses (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods), results are interpreted. Interpretations must incorporate threats to the trustworthiness of inferences (Shadish et al., 2002). Often the data collected will not afford causal interpretations such as "The programming was (in)effective". Causal statements require particular data collection designs and analyses (Horst et al., 2021). Carefully consider and clearly communicate what you can infer about program effectiveness given how the implementation fidelity and outcomes data were collected and analyzed.
7. Use results for program-related decisions	*As a designer of learning and development opportunities, how would you use the assessment results to improve your programming?* ● To what extent do the assessment results inform your understanding of programming effectiveness? Why? ● What evidence indicates problems with implementation, suggesting attention to instructor/facilitator training? ● What evidence indicates high-quality implementation but low outcomes achievement, suggesting revision to programming? ● How can the results be used to address equity issues related to the programming?	The purpose of outcomes assessment is to make evidence-informed programming modifications that improve student learning (Fulcher et al., 2014). Improvements can be stalled by low-quality outcomes data or the inability to understand results (Blaich & Wise, 2011). Given quality outcomes data, attention turns to implementation fidelity data. Poor implementation fidelity implies that planned programming was not experienced and thus was not assessed. In turn, the outcomes data should not be used to modify the planned programming. Instead, attention should focus on why planned programming was not implemented as designed. When implementation fidelity is high but outcomes data indicate that intended outcomes were not achieved, educators should consider modifications to programming that should (based on theory and research) result in students achieving the intended outcomes. When making modifications to programming, educators should explain the rationale for the new programming, evidence of its potential effectiveness, and alignment with intended outcomes (Fulcher & Prendergast, 2021).

self-generated questions relate to questions that are posed. In Step 4, they provide abstract responses to the self-focused questions in Table 1 so they internalize that assessment is integral to their work.

In Step 5, a rhetorical question is used to persuade engagement in outcomes assessment. Rhetorical questions, where the answer is implicit within the question, are used to focus a person's attention on the message of the argument. Used often in marketing, studies showed that when rhetorical questions were used sparingly and strategically in ads, consumers were more persuaded to purchase a product (e.g., Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004). Asking a rhetorical question after working through the questions and explanations in Table 1 will help student affairs educators internalize the message that outcomes assessment is important (Evans et al., 2018). Research supports the use of one rhetorical question (e.g., Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004) such as, "Assessment is helpful for your work as an educator, isn't it?"

After processing the rhetorical question, I recommend engaging in one last strategy of questioning. Answering questions about future behavior positively impacts the likelihood of engaging in that behavior (Spangenberg et al., 2016). Taking advantage of this phenomenon called the question-behavior effect (Wilding et al., 2016), seven self-prediction questions about engaging in assessment in the future are shared in the Appendix. These questions incorporate characteristics found to best prompt the intended behavior: self-prediction in nature ("Do you predict you will state student learning outcomes?"), a dichotomous response scale (yes or no), and no specification of time to perform the activity (Armitage et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Hill and Stitt-Bergh (2021) call for faculty to continuously ask "questions that matter" (p. 2) about student learning and program impact. I echo this call and direct it to student affairs educators. Using research showcasing the power of well-constructed questions, I offered a series of questions that matter regarding student learning and program impact. These resources should increase student affairs educators' perceived utility-value of outcomes assessment and engagement in assessment for improvement. By framing outcomes assessment as a process of asking and answering professionally-relevant questions, student affairs educators may opt into assessment-related skill-building workshops to answer these relevant questions.

Further, these resources I share address the following issues I experience when offering professional development in outcomes assessment to student affairs educators.

1. A common concern during professional development workshops is how an educator can communicate the steps of the assessment process to others in their office. I find that when I phrase the assessment cycle as a series of questions, the otherwise dry or vague set of steps become more meaningful and easier for student affairs educators to share with others.

2. Educators (student affairs or faculty) may express frustration or anger about needing to engage in assessment. I find that it becomes more difficult to rage against assessment when framed as answering fundamental questions about how to support student learning and development (the underlying goal of our work as educators).
3. When educators are asked to engage in assessment efforts for improvement, it may be perceived as a transition from their "regular work" (Bresciani, 2011; Hutchings, 2010, p. 13). During transitions, asking questions can change one's personal narrative about who they are in the context of their surroundings, including their professional work (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Redeveloping personal narratives about oneself is particularly important for student affairs educators who are asked to take on assessment-related roles early in their careers. Early-career professionals may have no or very limited perceptions about outcomes assessment and its relevance to their work (Bresciani, 2010; Denecke et al., 2011); thus, their conception of the utility-value of assessment is especially malleable. A questions-based approach to engaging in outcomes assessment should facilitate positive meaning-making on the relevance of outcomes assessment to their identity as an educator, therefore increasing engagement (Levy, 2020).
4. Some student affairs professionals may have little interest in facilitating and assessing student learning and development. Answering these questions allows reflection on their personal commitment to student learning and development in higher education. Put simply, it is not for everyone. By asking these questions and answering them honestly, student affairs professionals may realize they are not invested in promoting student learning, designing curriculum, providing opportunity to learn, and improving programming. Their interests may be more aligned with marketing, recruitment, event planning, grant writing, research, among other interests. If so, answering these questions may provide an opportunity to better understand one's place in the profession.

Although this article was directed to student affairs educators, this approach to increasing understanding and engagement in assessment should be effective for faculty as well. Moreover, the resources can be incorporated into workshops on assessment, guidance when engaging in assessment activities, or courses on assessment. A limitation of this work is the focus on assessment for learning improvement. Although assessment for learning improvement and assessment for accreditation mandates can overlap to some extent, they also differ in scope, difficulty, and ultimate goals (Finney & Horst, 2019). Other questions may be relevant if the focus of assessment is primarily for institutional accountability mandates.

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Appendix

Using Questions to Increase Value and Understanding of Outcomes Assessment

Instructions: If working alone, simply work through each step. If you are facilitating this activity for a group, read the instructions at the step aloud, allow participants time to process their answers individually, then guide discussion of responses. The steps in this activity can be embedded in a multi-day or multi-week study of outcomes assessment for improvement.

STEP 1: Write down at least one question that can be answered by engaging in outcomes assessment. Explain why that question (or those questions) are relevant to work as an educator.

STEP 2: Read through the questions below and compare the questions you generated in Step 1 to the questions stated here. These are the main questions in Table 1.

- As an educator, what do you believe your students should know, think, or be able to do?
- What programming would you, the curriculum designer, create to foster the desired learning and development?
- As an educator, how would you measure the student learning and development outcomes?
- What evidence would you, the curriculum designer, gather to describe the programming the students actually experienced?
- As an educator, how and when would you collect outcomes data to best understand student learning and development?
- As an evidence-informed educator, how would you analyze student learning and development data and interpret the results?
- As a designer of learning and development opportunities, how would you use the assessment results to improve your programming?

STEP 3: Explain how your questions from Step 1 relate to the questions above. How are they similar? How are they different?

STEP 4: Think of programming you designed, are currently designing, or have implemented. Draft answers to the 7 questions stated in Step 2. Use the sub-questions in Table 1 to clarify your responses. It is typical for this step to take time and effort. It is difficult, and worthwhile. You are articulating a plan to understand your impact on student learning and development. You will update your initial responses as you engage in the outcomes assessment process. At this point, what is most important is to begin processing and answering these questions.

STEP 5: Answer the following: Assessment is helpful for your work as an educator, isn't it?

STEP 6: Answer the following questions about engaging in specific assessment-related actions in the future. Respond by simply writing "yes" or "no" for each question.

- Do you predict you will articulate malleable and feasible student learning or development outcomes?
- Do you predict you will use evidence to create effective programming?
- Do you predict you will establish a way to measure your student learning or development outcomes?
- Do you predict you will collect implementation fidelity data?
- Do you predict you will collect outcomes data?
- Do you predict you will analyze and interpret implementation fidelity and outcomes data?
- Do you predict you will use results to make changes to programming?

Evaluating the Effectiveness of an Academic Success Program: Showcasing the Importance of Theory to Practice

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Abstract: To provide an example of outcomes assessment that aligns with student affairs standards (Finney & Horst, 2019a), we share our process of assessing a mandated eight-week program for students on academic probation. Furthermore, our process highlights the value of using existing theory and research to inform assessment and program redesign efforts (Pope et al., 2019). Using a high-quality theory-based measure, we assessed several student learning and development outcomes (e.g., institutional commitment, academic self-efficacy) that theory and research indicated are necessary for students to achieve academic success. Based on the outcomes assessment results, we identified which aspects of the program seemed to be working and which aspects needed improvement. Finally, we close by providing recommendations for other professionals seeking to build and assess high-quality student affairs programs informed by theory and research.

Keywords: academic success, retention, theory to practice

According to professional standards, student affairs professionals are responsible for building and assessing high-quality educational programming (Finney & Horst, 2019a). More specifically, they are expected to use theory and research to build evidence-informed programs that should work and then engage in outcomes assessment to examine if these programs do work (Pope et al., 2019). Unfortunately, although there are many examples in the student affairs literature of assessing educational programs, there is less guidance on using theory and empirical research to build and improve these programs. Thus, we share how we integrated research, programming, and assessment to redesign an academic success program and focus on malleable outcomes. By providing such an example, we hope to advance practice in the student affairs profession by illustrating the value of aligning programming and assessment efforts with existing theory and research (Finney & Horst, 2019b).

The Academic Success Program

The Academic Success Program (ASP) is an eight-week course offered each fall for students on academic probation or academic suspension. While completing ASP, students—including those technically suspended—are enrolled full-time (i.e., a minimum of 12 credit hours). The purpose of ASP is to equip students with the academic skills needed to achieve good academic standing (i.e., a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or higher). ASP is housed within the Division of Academic Affairs and coordinated by a graduate student enrolled in the M.Ed. in College Student Personnel Administration (CSPA).

During the eight-week program, approximately 90 to 100 students meet once a week in small to medium-sized groups (e.g., 10 to 25 students) for 1.5 hours to participate in discussion and activities. Class sessions focus on various topics, including time management, test-taking skills, goal setting, and campus resources. Undergraduate peer facilitators co-facilitate the classes after undergoing a two-day training to learn about the suspension/academic probation process, meet their co-facilitators, briefly review the ASP curriculum, and prepare to implement the first week's lesson plan. The ASP coordinator (i.e., the CSPA graduate student) supervises the peer facilitators, manages the ASP curriculum, and oversees program implementation.

Although ASP staff have collected data on the ultimate or distal outcome (i.e., cumulative GPA) since the program's inception, they did not engage in outcomes assessment before the process described below. There were no explicitly stated student learning and development outcomes until recently, meaning there was no articulation of what changes in students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills were necessary to achieve the GPA goal. With no specified outcomes, the intended purpose of each lesson or activity was unclear. As a result of this lack of clarity, the curriculum frequently changed with little justification. For example, one year, the curriculum included a unit on writing skills. Another year, a unit based on the StrengthsFinder assessment replaced the writing unit. The next year, the ASP coordinator replaced the StrengthsFinder unit, too. During this time, the ASP coordinators did not provide documentation to explain the logic of these changes or evidence to support these modifications. Discussions with program facilitators indicated this fluidity in programming reflected, in part, a lack of understanding of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills theoretically and empirically linked to academic success and the programming necessary to impact those outcomes.

Envisioned as a powerful intervention for an at-risk population, ASP needed an intentional, evidence-informed curriculum aligned with specified outcomes. The ASP coordinator recognized this need and reached out to us in the Center for Assessment and Research Studies to improve the program. With our guidance, the ASP coordinator devoted over 75 hours to re-envisioning the program outcomes and, in turn, the curriculum, as discussed below.

Redesigning ASP Programming and Assessment

The first step to redesigning the ASP curriculum was to identify appropriate student learning and development outcomes based on the literature (Pope et al., 2019). We needed to decide what knowledge, attitudes, and skills ASP students should cultivate to foster academic success and retention. This process involved reviewing both theory and research related to postsecondary academic success.

When reviewing the literature, we found SuccessNavigator—an assessment developed by ETS (Markle et al., 2013). This assessment measures essential skills related to academic success and retention. Although we were not initially interested in using SuccessNavigator as an outcome measure, we relied heavily on the research and theory underpinning its development when redesigning the ASP curriculum (Markle & O'Banion, 2014). When

developing SuccessNavigator, ETS staff reviewed academic success and retention literature in higher education and educational psychology journals. Through this review, they identified 10 skills linked to academic success and persistence in college (see Table 1). They classified these skills into four general areas: (a) academic skills, (b) commitment, (c) self-management, and (d) social support.

Using these skills as a guide, the ASP coordinator drafted an initial set of student learning and development outcomes that should increase cumulative GPA (i.e., the ultimate or distal outcome), based on theory and research. Specifying these outcomes allowed the ASP staff to engage in curriculum-to-outcome mapping for the first time (see Table 2). From this mapping process, we were pleased to find that the ASP curriculum aligned with many outcomes in the academic success literature, including organizational skills, tools for combating test anxiety, and institutional support resources. However, no programming existed for several key outcomes (e.g., stress management, academic self-efficacy, institutional commitment). Furthermore, some of ASP's curricular elements were not supported in the academic success research (e.g., instructing students on how to take Cornell-style notes) and, thus, they did not map to any of the research-based outcomes. In the future, the ASP coordinator could remove these activities to increase efficiency or provide additional time for new programming aligned with the outcomes. Ultimately, we decided to use SuccessNavigator to assess the newly specified outcomes. Based on the results, we could then identify which outcomes required additional or modified curriculum.

Method

Below, we describe the procedure, participants, and measures used to assess ASP.

Table 1. *ETS SuccessNavigator General Skills and Subskills.*

General Skill	Subskill	Definition
Academic Skills Strategies and tools for academic success	Organization	Strategies for organizing time and work
	Meeting Class Expectations	Doing what's expected to meet course requirements including in-class behaviors and assignments
Commitment Active pursuit toward an academic goal	Commitment to College Goals	Perceived value of and determination to excel in and complete college
	Institutional Commitment	Positive evaluations of and attachment to the institution
Self-Management Reactions to both academic and daily life stressors	Sensitivity to Stress	Tendency to feel upset or discouraged when placed under pressure or burdened by many demands on one's time
	Academic Self-Efficacy	Belief in one's ability to achieve in an academic setting
	Test Anxiety	Reactions to test-taking experiences, including negative feelings and thoughts

General Skill	Subskill	Definition
Social Support Connecting with people and resources for student success	Connectedness	General sense of engagement and belonging
	Institutional Support	Attitudes about and tendency to seek help from established resources
	Barriers to Success	Most common barriers include financial pressures, conflicting work schedules, family responsibilities, and limited institutional knowledge

Note. Higher scores reflect higher levels of each construct with the exception of Sensitivity to Stress, Text Anxiety and Barriers to Success. Higher scores for these subskills reflect lower sensitivity to stress, lower test anxiety and lower barriers, respectively.

Table 2. *Mapping of ASP Student Learning Outcomes to Programming.*

***SuccessNavigator* Subskill**	**Newly Created Student Learning Outcomes**	**Existing Programming**
Organization	Report increased use of strategies for organizing coursework and time.	Yes
Meeting Class Expectations	Report an increase in meeting requirements of courses.	Yes
Commitment to College Goals	Report an increase in perceived value of college.	Yes
Institutional Commitment	Report an increase in attachment to the institution.	No
Sensitivity to Stress	Report a decrease in feelings of frustration or discouragement associated with academics.	No
Academic Self-Efficacy	Report an increased belief in one's ability to succeed in an academic setting.	No
Test Anxiety	Report a decrease in negative thoughts and feelings during testing.	Yes
Connectedness	Report an increased sense of belonging.	No
Institutional Support	Report an increase in help-seeking attitudes and actions.	Yes

Note. Each *SuccessNavigator* subskill score was associated with an outcome except for *Barriers to Success*. ASP could not implement programming to reduce such barriers; thus, we did not have an outcome associated with barriers to success.

Procedure and Participants

In the fall of 2018, students completed SuccessNavigator—a proctored, computerized assessment—before they engaged in ASP (i.e., pre-test) and after its completion (i.e., post-test). Students were not allowed to move to the next section of SuccessNavigator (e.g., on-line instructions, items, individualized report) until everyone completed the current section. This process was employed to slow response rates to produce more thoughtful answers (Barry & Finney, 2009). All students completed all items within the allotted 30 minutes. If students completed the assessment in less than five minutes (i.e., an indicator of thoughtless responding), their scores were considered invalid, and they had to complete the assessment again. Fortunately, only one student had to retake the assessment for this reason during the pre-test administration.

Ultimately, 116 students were mandated to complete ASP. Of those students, 22 did not attend the mandatory pre-test session. As a result, ASP staff dropped these students from the program. Thus, 94 students completed the pre-test. An additional 21 students dropped out of ASP at some point during the eight weeks (i.e., 22% attrition rate). The remaining 73 students completed the proctored post-test during the last class period.[1] Of the 73 students who completed the program, 49.3% were male, and 69.9% identified as White, with the remaining students identifying as Black (11.0%), Hispanic (8.2%), or Asian (8.2%). The average age was 20.6 years—ranging from 18 to 26. In comparison to the university population, ASP students were more likely to be male and identify as members of a historically underrepresented racial or ethnic group.

Measure

Each SuccessNavigator subscore reflects student responses to between 7 and 11 Likert-type items. Students responded to each item using a six-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Students received a standardized score for each of the 10 subskills. The mean of the standardized distribution is 100, with a standard deviation of 15. Scores below 100 indicated below average competency relative to the test-taker population.

Using the standardized scores, SuccessNavigator creates three skill-level categories for each skill: Low, Moderate, or High. The three categories are relative to other test-takers across the United States. The Low category represents the bottom 25% of scorers, the Moderate category represents the middle 50% of scorers, and the High category represents the top 25% of scorers.

SuccessNavigator has been shown to produce reliable scores. Furthermore, the test developers provide ample validity evidence to support score interpretation (i.e., factor structure, relations with other constructs; Markle et al., 2013). SuccessNavigator scores have also been shown to function equivalently across time (Rikoon & Midkiff, 2018),

[1] We examined the pre-test scores of the individuals who dropped out and found that they did not significantly differ from those who participated in all eight weeks of programming in respect to the 10 *SuccessNavigator* subskills. Additionally, the students who dropped out were similar with respect to age and ethnicity, although a larger percentage of the students who dropped out were male compared to those who did not drop out.

allowing for longitudinal assessment of change in each skill, as we did in the current ASP evaluation.

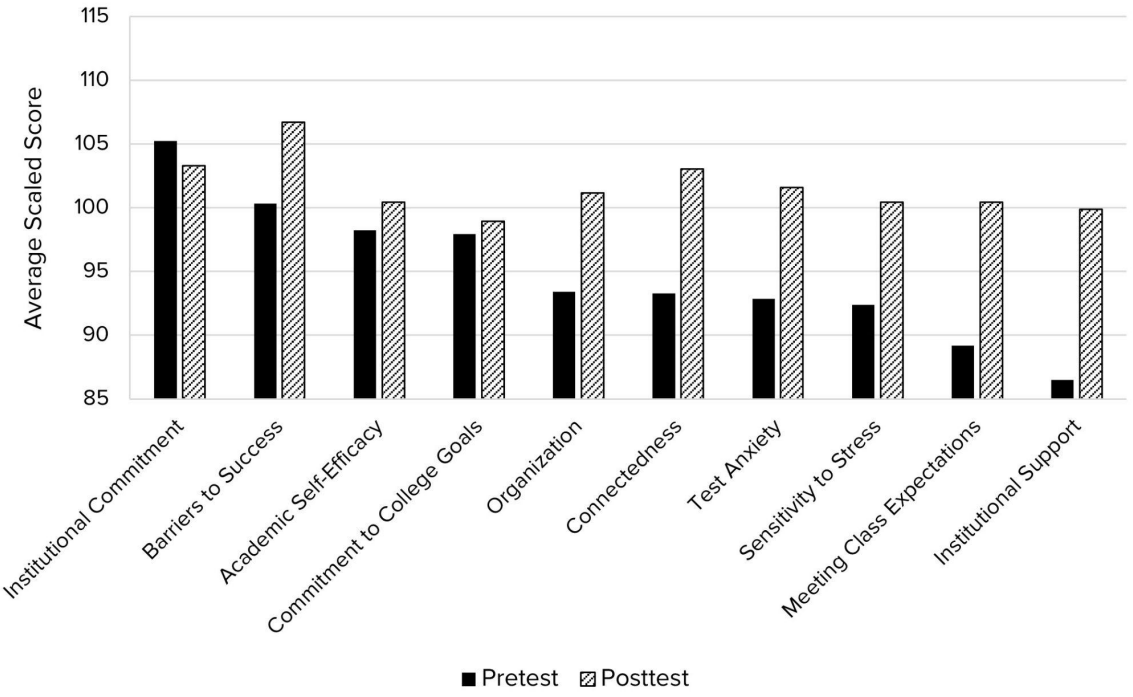
Results

We examined students' skill levels before and after ASP. First, we present the pre-test results by ordering skills from highest to lowest average score. Then, we present the post-test results, organized by expectations of pre-post change.

Pre-test Results

Understanding students' skill levels before beginning ASP reveals the skills for which students have the greatest opportunity to experience a change in performance. ASP students entered the program with above average institutional commitment (see Figure 1). They tended to feel a strong attachment to and positive affect for the university. This finding may lead one to believe there is little need for programming designed to increase students' commitment to the university. However, there was substantial variability in pre-test scores (SD = 13.01; see Table 3). Thus, even though the mean was above average, a considerable number of students indicated below-average institutional commitment before engaging in ASP (i.e., 19% of students were Low at pre-test; see Figure 2).

Figure 1. *Average Pre-test and Post-test Scores for ASP Participants by Subskill Area.*



Note. Subskills are ordered from the highest average score at pre-test (institutional commitment) to the lowest average score at pre-test (institutional support).

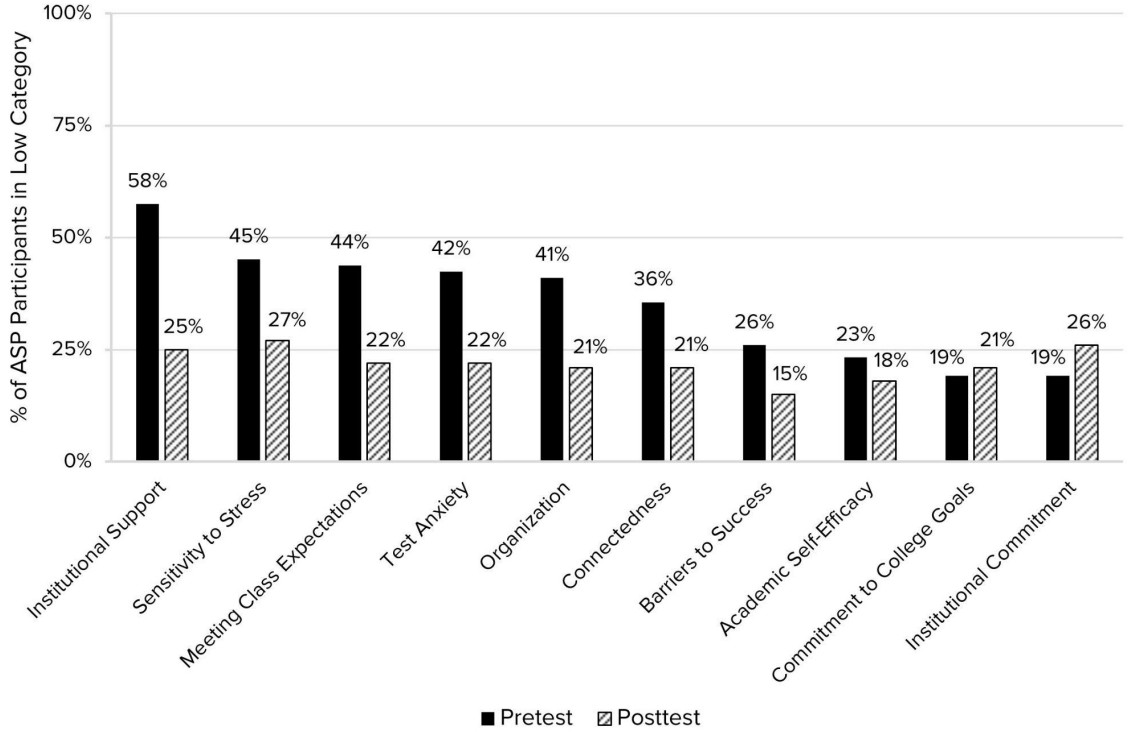
Table 3. *Means and SDs for each SuccessNavigator Subskill at Pre-test, Post-test, and Change over Time.*

	Pre-test		Post-test		Change		CI of Change		ES
Subskill	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	Lower	Upper	*d*
Organization	93.43	14.67	101.15	14.95	7.72*	11.66	5.00	10.44	0.66
Meeting Class Expectations	89.19	14.71	100.45	12.05	11.27*	14.28	7.94	14.60	0.78
Commitment to College Goals	97.94	15.57	98.94	15.22	1.00	11.09	-1.59	3.59	0.09
Institutional Commitment	105.23	13.01	103.31	14.95	-1.93	9.61	-4.17	0.32	-0.20
Sensitivity to Stress	92.38	17.60	100.44	16.01	8.06*	12.75	5.09	11.04	0.63
Academic Self-Efficacy	98.22	17.21	100.42	14.20	2.20	15.90	-1.51	5.91	0.14
Test Anxiety	92.86	17.11	101.58	17.02	8.72*	14.13	5.42	12.02	0.62
Connectedness	93.28	19.81	103.03	14.70	9.75*	14.99	6.25	13.25	0.65
Institutional Support	86.49	18.42	99.87	13.88	13.38*	16.22	9.60	17.16	0.82
Barriers to Success	100.35	15.27	106.71	13.74	6.36	10.69	3.87	8.86	0.59

Note. SD change = *SD* of differences scores, which represents variability in change across students (i.e., some students changed more from before to after ASP). CI of change = 95% confidence interval about the average change. ES = effect size. *d* = Cohen's *d* effect size, which was computed by dividing the mean change by the standard deviation of the difference scores. *$p < .05$.

Students had above-average scores on barriers to success, which indicates the extent to which various external factors (e.g., financial pressures, family responsibilities) negatively impacted academic success was relatively low. Given our goal was to assess the impact of ASP on malleable student success outcomes, no outcomes associated with barriers to success were articulated. ASP could not be expected to impact the degree to which students experienced external barriers. With that said, descriptive analyses provided insight into the challenges incoming ASP students faced outside the classroom. Fortunately, on average, students did not experience external barriers to success to a greater extent than other students across the country. Given only 15% of our students received an income-based federal Pell grant in 2017 (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), this result is not surprising.

Figure 2. *Percentage of ASP Students (n = 73) Categorized as Low at Pre-test vs. Post-test.*



Note. For example, when examining Institutional Support, of the 73 students who completed ASP, 58% (42 students) were identified as low at pre-test, whereas 25% (18 students) were identified as low at post-test. Subskills are ordered from greatest percentage of low scorers at pre-test (institutional support) to smallest percentage of low scorers at pre-test (institutional commitment).

ASP students scored similarly to other students across the nation on commitment to college goals and academic self-efficacy. Incoming ASP students did not value college less than other students. This finding was encouraging. Commitment to obtaining a degree is one of the strongest predictors of college persistence (Porchea et al., 2010). Although, on average, ASP students believed in their ability to be academically successful, the variability in self-efficacy scores was relatively large (SD = 17.21). A substantial number of students had below-average academic self-efficacy (i.e., 23% of students were Low at pre-test).

On average, ASP students scored lowest on academic skills (i.e., organization, meeting class expectations), self-management (i.e., test anxiety, sensitivity to stress), and social support (i.e., connectedness, institutional support), with the two lowest skills being meeting class expectations and institutional support. Meeting class expectations, or the extent to which students do what is expected of them regarding coursework, includes behaviors such as coming to class on time and promptly turning in assignments. The pre-test results suggested ASP students had ample room for improvement in this area (i.e., 44% of students were Low at pre-test). Students who score Low on institutional support do not know when help is needed, rarely ask questions, are unaware of resources on campus, or never use support. Unfortunately, nearly 60% of ASP students were Low at pre-test. This finding is troubling; students who do not engage in adaptive help-seeking tend to have lower academic performance (Finney et al., 2018). Thus, a crucial component of ASP

should focus on teaching students about available resources and unpacking why they are rarely used.

Coupling the curriculum-outcome map in Table 2 with pre-test results enabled us to anticipate our post-test findings. First, we expected outcomes with high pre-test scores (i.e., institutional commitment, barriers to success) to remain high whether programming existed or was lacking. For these outcomes, high post-test scores should not be attributed to ASP. Second, we expected outcomes with low-to-moderate pre-test scores and limited-to-no programming (i.e., connectedness, sensitivity to stress, academic self-efficacy) to remain low-to-moderate at post-test. For these outcomes, any positive changes from pre-test to post-test should not be attributed to ASP. Third, we expected outcomes that were low-to-moderate at pre-test and were targeted through ASP programming (i.e., institutional support, meeting class expectations, test anxiety, commitment to college goals, organization) to increase from pre-test to post-test.

Post-test Results

Below we organize results by pre-test levels to align with our expectations above.

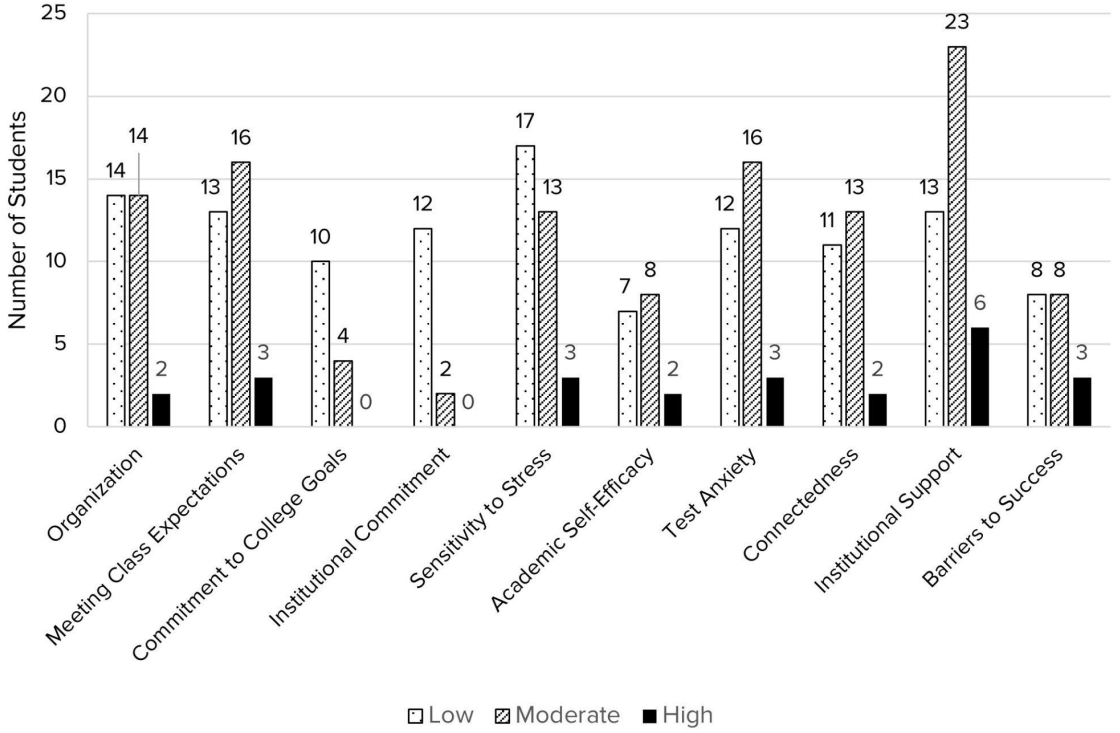
Subskills High at Pre-test

We did not observe a significant or practical change from pre-test to post-test on institutional commitment and barriers to success (see Table 3). This lack of change was expected, given no programming was associated with either construct. Notably, however, the percentage of students with Low institutional commitment increased from 19% at pre-test to 26% at post-test (see Figure 2). These results suggest that even though the average institutional commitment score was high, a substantial number of students may still need intentional programming because they are on the low end of the institutional commitment scale.

Subskills Low-to-Moderate at Pre-test with No Associated Programming

We observed a significant, positive change from pre-test to post-test on students' connectedness and sensitivity to stress, despite no intentional programming. If this result replicates in future assessments, it may be that informal activities within ASP (e.g., making friends) are positively impacting connectedness and sensitivity to stress. Alternatively, the change may be attributable to maturation or students' experiences outside of ASP. It should be noted, more than 50% of the students who were Low on sensitivity to stress at pre-test (i.e., high levels of stress; unfavorable result) and 42% of the students who were Low on connectedness at pre-test were still Low at post-test (see Figure 3). These results suggest these outcomes remained a challenge for many students.

Figure 3. *Distribution of Students at Post-test for Students Categorized as Low at Pre-test.*



Note: For example, of the 30 students categorized as low on Organization at pre-test, 14 remained low at post-test (no change), 14 increased to moderate, and 2 increased to the high category after completing ASP.

There was no statistically significant change in students' academic self-efficacy. More than 40% of the students who were Low on self-efficacy at pre-test were Low at post-test. Although expected, given the lack of programming targeting self-efficacy, the results suggest an area of need: Students do not seem to develop academic self-efficacy independently.

Skills Low-to-Moderate at Pre-test with Associated Programming

Given pre-test results and the existing ASP curriculum, we hypothesized growth on five outcomes: (a) institutional support, (b) meeting class expectations, (c) test anxiety, (d) organization, and (e) commitment to college goals. As predicted, scores significantly improved for institutional support and meeting class expectations (see Table 3). Half of the students who scored Low on meeting class expectations at pre-test increased to Moderate by post-test. Nearly 10% increased to High (see Figure 3). Similarly, only 31% of students who scored Low on institutional support at pre-test were still Low at post-test. Scores significantly improved, albeit more modestly, for test anxiety and organization. However, nearly 50% of the students who scored Low on organization at pre-test were still Low at post-test.

Unfortunately, although there was programming designed to increase commitment to college goals, there was no significant change. More than 70% of students who scored Low at pre-test were still Low at post-test. These results suggest current programming may (1) not be implemented well or (2) be insufficient to impact commitment to college goals.

These results provide some initial evidence suggesting that the ASP curriculum targeting these outcomes may increase attitudes and skills, particularly for institutional commitment and meeting class expectations. However, for the five outcomes with intentional programming, between 21% and 25% of ASP students were Low at post-test, indicating room for improvement.

Discussion

We gathered data to inform conversations about the efficacy of ASP and potential next steps. We entered this initial assessment knowing there were limitations to our measurement and data collection design, which would impact the inferences we could make about program effectiveness. Thus, before sharing implications and next steps, we discuss limitations and lessons learned.

Limitations

We relied exclusively on indirect (i.e., self-reported) measures of the ASP outcomes. Although these data provided insight into students' perceptions of their proficiency, the utility of self-reported data for skills assessment is limited. For each outcome, it would have been preferable to develop additional measures that required students to demonstrate their knowledge or skills. For example, we articulated an indirect outcome for the sensitivity to stress subskill (i.e., students will report a decrease in feelings of frustration or discouragement associated with academics). However, we could have also articulated a knowledge-based outcome for sensitivity to stress (e.g., students will be able to describe two stress management techniques and explain how each technique can minimize the effects of stress). We could then assess via students' written responses if an understanding of stress management techniques relates to lower self-reported sensitivity to stress. Suppose students reported high sensitivity to stress after completing ASP. In that case, results associated with the knowledge-based outcome could uncover why this occurred and how to adjust ASP to improve future outcomes. Direct measures could include multiple-choice tests (e.g., knowledge of strategies to organize time), role-playing performances (e.g., ability to ask for help), or other types of assessments.

Another limitation is the lack of implementation fidelity data. When discussing programming to increase retention, Tinto (2006) noted, "The regrettable fact is that many good ideas are not well implemented or implemented fully" (p. 8). Implementation fidelity data uncover the extent to which programming is implemented as planned (Fisher et al., 2014). It allows one to identify whether poor results reflect ineffective programming or poor implementation. Without this data, making inferences about student learning as a function of the program becomes a tenuous proposition (Gerstner & Finney, 2013). For example, despite intentional programming, there was no change in commitment to college goals. One conclusion might be that this intentional programming did not work. However, a second conclusion is that programming was not implemented as planned (e.g., peer facilitators ran out of time, students were disengaged). This is a plausible hypothesis given the limited training of peer facilitators. If we assumed programming was not effective when it was not implemented correctly, we would waste time and resources redesigning programming that might be effective if implemented well. Unfortunately, without

implementation fidelity data, we cannot select between these two conclusions (Smith et al., 2017).

Another limitation is the lack of a detailed curriculum map. To collect implementation fidelity data, we need a clear articulation of which programming components are expected to impact which outcomes (Smith et al., 2019). This mapping requires an articulation of program theory (i.e., how—and why—programming should be effective). In this case, there were clear, research-based links among the intermediate student learning outcomes (e.g., organization, institutional support) and the distal outcome (cumulative GPA). However, there was no articulation of the links among the program components (e.g., lectures, activities, assignments) and the intermediate student learning outcomes. As shown in Table 2, when asked, Was the ASP curriculum designed to impact this specific outcome?, the ASP staff could only provide general yes or no responses. They did not conduct detailed curriculum-to-outcome mapping. Given the lack of specificity regarding the links among program components and outcomes, we cannot use these assessment results to recommend specific curricular changes (Smith & Finney, 2020). We can only note that the programming in place may need to be modified.

Use of Results to Inform ASP Programming

The preliminary results suggest one outcome is well-suited for a research-based curriculum (re)design: academic self-efficacy. There was no significant change in students' self-efficacy, and ASP currently has no intentional programming linked to self-efficacy. Commitment to college goals also had no significant change. However, ASP includes programming built to impact this outcome. Given students' commitment to college goals is a malleable outcome that can be impacted by programming (Grant-Vallone et al., 2003), this lack of change indicates programming is either ineffective or not implemented well. Thus, before recommending a curriculum redesign associated with commitment to college goals, we recommend examining whether the current results reflect poor implementation. Hence, we focus the discussion on academic self-efficacy.

Regarding self-efficacy, 23% of students reported Low academic self-efficacy at pre-test, which is problematic given the empirically supported relation between academic self-efficacy and performance (Robbins et al., 2004). Fortunately, there is extensive research on self-efficacy in general and on academic self-efficacy in particular (Schunk, 1985), including research on self-efficacy interventions. Drawing from this literature, the ASP coordinator could construct a detailed logic model to describe how ASP will intentionally support students to develop academic self-efficacy. For example, attributional feedback can increase self-efficacy (Jain et al., 2007; Schunk, 1983). With attributional feedback, a student's successes are attributed to ability and—more importantly—effort. For example, an ASP assignment might ask students to reflect on past academic success and explain how they achieved that success, focusing on their effort. Importantly, implementing such an intervention and assessing its effectiveness requires dedicated time for reading research, designing curriculum, and training facilitators.

Use of Results to Inform ASP Assessment

To provide more meaningful information about program effectiveness, we recommend three assessment-related changes. First, the ASP coordinator should articulate knowledge-based outcomes for each subskill that can be assessed via direct measures. Then, measures should be identified or developed to assess these new knowledge-based outcomes.

Second, they should create an implementation fidelity checklist for ASP. To develop this checklist, the ASP coordinator should make explicit connections among program components and outcomes (Finney & Smith, 2016). The checklist can be used to collect implementation fidelity data and as a training tool when on-boarding facilitators (Swain et al., 2013).

To support the validity of inferences about program effectiveness, the ASP coordinator must identify a comparison group of students who do not engage in ASP and collect data on their outcomes. Students who complete ASP should experience greater outcomes than students who do not complete the program. This companion data would provide more robust evidence of ASP's effectiveness. Identifying an appropriate comparison group will take thought and effort, but it should be a goal.

Connections to Best Practice in Student Affairs

This assessment effort was situated within the larger process of intentionally redesigning ASP to align with theory and research. Our motivations for engaging in this project were multi-fold. First, evidence-informed programming is an expectation for student affairs professionals. According to professional standards (Finney & Horst, 2019a), student affairs professionals must build programming that reflects the best available evidence in student development, cognition, student success, and a wide variety of other domains relevant to practice. Moreover, evidence-informed programs can be more meaningfully assessed than programs developed with less intentionality (Bresciani, 2010). It becomes nearly impossible to use assessment results for program improvement without a clear articulation of why programming should impact the outcomes (Pope et al., 2019). Simply put, it is difficult to fix something when it breaks without a thorough understanding of how it was supposed to work in the first place.

Given the importance of evidence-informed programming for student affairs practice, we close by providing recommendations for professionals seeking to build and assess such programs.

1. Before asking the assessment question, Does my program work?, student affairs professionals must answer the programming question, How should my program work? Attempting to answer the former question without a clear response to the latter will result in inefficient use of assessment resources. Assessment works best when used in a confirmatory way to determine whether programs that should work actually do work.
2. One of the most important steps when building evidence-informed programs is to specify intermediate student learning outcomes (e.g., knowledge, attitudes, skills) that

have been empirically linked to the program's distal outcome (e.g., GPA, leadership skills, cultural competence). These intermediate outcomes will dictate necessary programming and outcome measures.

3. When building evidence-informed programs, professionals must invest a significant amount of time on the front-end to save time in the long-term. The ASP coordinator who led the ASP program redesign effort spent 75 hours consuming research, specifying intermediate outcomes, and developing new programming. Now that evidence-informed programming exists, there is no need for future ASP coordinators to spend dozens of hours re-creating programming each year. Instead, the ASP coordinator can focus on assessing and improving the existing evidence-informed programming.
4. For those engaging in the process of building evidence-informed programming, publish your work. There are few theory-to-practice models with enough detail to effectively guide student affairs professionals through the specifics of applying research to practice. We provide this study as an illustration, but more examples are needed.

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Looking from the Outside In: Considerations for External Assessment

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Abstract: Grant projects. Program review. Accreditation. All of these may involve the use of external reviewers to provide consultation and objective evaluation. Working with external visitors, or serving in this capacity, can be a complicated process to navigate. While external review strategies have clear advantages, they also present distinct challenges to the external reviewers and those internal to the project. Staff in departments undergoing review may experience anxiety and wonder how to maximize chances for success. Using Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame model of perspectives on organizations, the authors offer considerations for student affairs professionals engaging in the external review process for both external reviewers and internal parties. These considerations include encouraging individuals to be thoughtful about campus culture, logistics, access to information, effective working relationships, and explicit clarification of the nature and purpose of the task(s). Ultimately, these considerations focus on ways to make the external review process positive and effective.

Keywords: External review, program review, assessment, organizational theory

Assessment is the effort to capture an accurate picture of programs, processes, and outcomes to improve practice (Schuh et al., 2016). By gathering data from multiple sources, assessors can create a mosaic to picture what is happening. Often, faculty and staff involved with the program or process are in the best position to identify and gather that data. Those closest to the object of the assessment have a deep understanding of the component elements, and their investment in the results yields effective assessments. However, in some situations, it is helpful to have new eyes and perspectives on the work. Sometimes this is mandated; institutional or program accreditation processes, for example, commonly require external visitors to review a self-study and talk to stakeholders to come to conclusions and make recommendations to the accrediting body. This external review is seen as an essential part of the process and vital to the validity and credibility of the outcome. Many institutions employ a similar model for their internal academic program and student affairs unit reviews as part of an overall institutional effectiveness plan.

Similarly, student affairs units or divisions conducting self-studies based on the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education standards of practice frequently invite professionals to visit campus to review the self-study and offer recommendations for improvement. It is also common for grant funding agencies to require an external assessment team to provide an objective review and evaluation of the grant-funded work. An external assessment provides objectivity, fresh perspective, and wisdom from experts, which self-studies may lack. Certainly, some of the expertise necessary for the review

process is internal; however, this article focuses on external reviewers. Additionally, external is broadly defined and may mean part of another in-house unit—or external to the institution entirely. The terms used to describe this role may vary with the context—external visitor, reviewer, evaluator, assessor—but for this article, we use reviewer as a broad term to encompass all of these.

While such external assessment strategies have clear advantages, they also present some distinct challenges to the external reviewers and those internal to the project itself. Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame model for understanding organizations offers a useful perspective and context for approaching an external review process. In this article, we offer considerations for student affairs professionals embarking on the external review process, whether as external visitors or internal parties working with them. Ultimately, these considerations are focused on easing anxiety, maximizing chances for success, and making the process positive and effective.

Our Experience / Context

Before exploring the considerations, we describe our experiences with external assessments to provide helpful context. Individually, we have assessment experiences at many levels ranging from departmental-level program review to evaluating large-scale institutional strategic initiatives. These experiences include the following:

- serving as an external visitor for both accreditation and institutional program reviews,
- hosting external reviewers for division and program-level evaluation activities,
- serving as an external assessor and intervention strategist for department-level programmatic initiatives,
- building and sustaining multifaceted outcomes-based assessment plans for various departmental programs, and
- serving as external assessors for departments throughout a division of student affairs.

The authors recently worked together as members of the external assessment team for an ambitious, multi-year, grant-funded initiative at a mid-sized private university.

Organizational Framework

To discuss takeaways from our experiences as external reviewers, we utilize what Bolman and Deal (2017) called the four frames (i.e., structural, human resource, political, symbolic). These frames give us a way to think about how organizations operate and, relatedly, how external reviewers experience organizations. While we acknowledge the inherent limitations in applying one structural framework to external reviewers' broad and varied role, we find it helpful to ground our considerations within a commonly used framework. We utilized the four frames to situate the successes and challenges we encountered while serving as external reviewers for two primary reasons:

1. they provide a framework for identifying potential pitfalls in the planning and execution of external assessment, and
2. the lessons we learned from serving as external reviewers primarily focus on how organizations operate.

The structural frame explains that organizations rely on goals, policies, systems, and hierarchies to maintain their functions. In higher education, leaders use the structural frames to meet institutional goals, establish policies for students and campus personnel, and create systems that ensure the learning environment is seamless for students. For example, an administrator may create a one-stop-shop for registration, financial aid, and the bursar to serve students seeking to enroll in classes, ultimately fulfilling the institution's mission. The human resource frame capitalizes on the employees' strengths within an organization and focuses on building relationships to achieve a common goal. In higher education, a senior student affairs officer may encourage collaboration between departments, relying on the relationships among departmental employees, to achieve the mission of student engagement. The political frame values competition within an organization and positions conflict as necessary to get the best result. Within the lens of the political frame, conflict is seen as a good thing. On college campuses, we may find senior-level professionals operating within this frame during decision-making meetings to achieve the best result for students. Finally, the symbolic frame focuses on an organization's culture, emphasizing rituals, ceremonies, and stories to maintain its culture. Many higher education institutions are steeped in traditions and rituals, such as orientation, convocation, and commencement, which serve as symbolic representations of the institution and the educational process.

Though the four frames provide a structure for discussion, and we presented them in distinct ways, some considerations may fall across several frames; they are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, throughout the article, we situate considerations within these four frames to link external assessment to relevant organizational development theory.

Considerations for External Reviewers

What follows are considerations for those who may take on the role of external reviewers. Whereas *recommendations* would suggest what should be done, and *lessons* would imply what not to do, we have chosen to talk about *considerations*. We introduce these considerations in the form of questions. In posing questions to consider, we intend to prompt thinking that is careful and deliberate, takes account of the local context, and leads to decision-making or strategic processes that are informed and intentional.

Consideration 1: How will you gain access to the information and resources needed to carry out the task effectively? How will campus structure(s), policies, and procedures affect your work in this role?

As external reviewers begin to engage in the assessment process, it is important to discuss, at length, the logistics that will impact the ease of sending and receiving information. Because it is critical for external reviewers to have a full picture of the data they are assessing, full access to the data is paramount. But, depending on the areas under review, there may be FERPA or HIPAA considerations that limit it. It is here that external reviewers begin to engage Bolman and Deal's (2017) structural frame, examining the "social architecture of work" (p. 66):

- Is the external assessment team in the best position to send and receive data with ease?

- What are the systems that hold the data that are being assessed?
- Do the external reviewers have access to those systems?
- What is the process for getting data, and what level of access is needed to review the systems and processes in place?
- Who are the people that have and/or need access to the data to be successful?

If part of the role of the external reviewer is to collect data, where will that data be held, and who is responsible for it? These are just a few questions to consider upon entering as an external reviewer. There are legal and ethical considerations involved, and the Institutional Review Board may be a valuable resource in assuring that data are handled appropriately. This may require some strategic relationship building to make sure all those related to the project, or those who play critical roles in getting accurate data, are on the same page.

In addition to having access to data, it is important to have a comprehensive plan to ensure that external reviewers have full and equal access to all relevant and needed information. This type of access may require reviewers to be connected to the right people, which could help separate logistics from organizational culture and politics. For example, although it may be the institutional culture to send formal requests through several offices to get data, this may not be a necessary process for external reviewers. Instead of receiving permissions through several offices, it may be best for external reviewers to receive direct access to the source. While this may not be an easy feat, consider how you might gain access through relationships with key stakeholders to enable an efficient, accurate, and beneficial process to all those who need the information.

In addition to logistics and access, structural considerations may include the workload and reviewers' expectations. These considerations are especially important when the review or relationship takes place over an extended time. These are structural considerations because they pertain to maximizing efficiency and product(s) and clarifying roles and objectives. For ongoing, formal external assessment, it is important to decide at the onset of the project issues like percentage of work time, compensation, and specific desired outcomes of the assessment team. Additionally, it is helpful for the reviewers to establish regular check-ins with the unit under review to make any necessary adjustments. Check-ins can be in the form of face-to-face meetings, virtual meetings, and/or submitting formal reports. Regardless, it is vital that all project members check-in regularly and that the frequency of the check-ins is established at the onset of the project.

Consideration 2: What are the political and power dynamics in the campus culture that may provide context for your work?

Campus culture differs at every institution and situates the assessment effort within a unique context. Before engaging in external assessment, learn what you can about the institutional culture, politics, and values. An examination and understanding of cultural displays, such as rituals (both formal and informal), customs, symbols, and language, reveal helpful and necessary insights into the complexities of campus culture and what community members deem important and meaningful (Manning, 2017). Campus culture

includes norms of campus stakeholders, university traditions, taboos, and current on-campus discourse. While campus culture may be difficult to glean, depending on the positionality of the external assessment team, finding ways to get a more well-rounded view of the campus is critical to effective assessment. What an external assessment team may deem as harmless could be harmful or problematic given the campus culture.

Additionally, it is necessary to consider the positionality of the external assessment team. Bolman and Deal's (2017) political frame describes organizations as jungles, where power is always at play.

- Are there power dynamics, formal or informal, that impact the relationship between the assessment team and the assessment site?
- Is there mutual respect between both parties?
- Does trust exist between the two entities?

These are all questions to consider before engaging in the assessment.

Below we offer a few strategies for gaining a better awareness of campus culture:

1. **Chat with as many stakeholders as possible.** Whether they be students, faculty, staff, alumni, or community members, it is important to get several accounts about the campus culture. While it is important to approach this exploration with transparency and delicacy, it is necessary to get a variety of perspectives.
2. **Inquire about possible landmines.** As external reviewers seek to build relationships and obtain accurate information, it is important that they watch for the landmines that will restrict access to essential information or affect how they are received and perceived. What are the taboo topics and cultural faux pas on campus?
3. **Seek to understand recent campus events.** As external reviewers look to assess with precision and accuracy, a conversation about recent campus events may help provide context. To gather the most authentic and accurate data, it is important that external reviewers understand recent controversies that could prove detrimental to effective assessment. To clarify how this may manifest, we offer the following example: A student group brings a controversial speaker to campus. The speaker polarizes the campus and causes unrest among the student body for the weeks following. Without knowing this information, an external assessment team conducts a campus climate survey soon after the speaker comes to campus. Though the external assessment team may receive rich data, a lack of understanding about the abnormal campus environment results in the external assessment team's skewed perspective on the current climate. Therefore, external assessment teams must understand recent campus events for accurate assessment and reporting.
4. **Recognize how positionality affects approach.** It is important to consider the perspectives of both the external assessment team and the assessment site throughout the process. While external reviewers may approach projects with a big-picture, and perhaps a theoretical lens, it is necessary to consider the perspective of the assessment site. While the assessment team may view something negatively, it may be positive to the constituents on campus—or the reverse.

Consideration 3: How will you navigate relationships on campus that will support your work?

Bresciani and colleagues (2009) identified several barriers to effective student affairs assessment: coordination of the process, collaboration, and trust. While they were not explicitly referring to external review processes, these barriers must be considered and intentionally navigated in an external review context. Healthy relationships between the unit under review and external reviewers are a key consideration in assessment work. Schuh and colleagues (2016) remind us that this process is akin to ethnography, and the concepts of building trust and rapport in negotiating access to the field apply. Relationships between and among constituents influence nearly every aspect of the project.

For reviewers to be successful, they need to galvanize support for initiatives; gain access to files, students, and/or personnel; develop and sustain trust and rapport; and ensure the ability to recognize and navigate institutional politics. Reviewers must exercise agency in garnering campus-wide support for a large-scale initiative. To make progress on pieces of the initiative, reviewers will likely need access to (and support from) various offices, materials, and data. Logistically, reviewers who are external to the institution may face great difficulty accessing said items. Having well-cultivated relationships across campus helps gain access, share the project's narrative, and bolster campus-wide knowledge and understanding.

The human resource frame centers the people within the organization, emphasizing the importance of relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The relationship between internal parties and external reviewers is much like the relationship between qualitative researchers and their interviewees. Some level of familiarity and rapport is quite helpful for a mutually beneficial, conversational partnership. For example, when the researcher and participant share the same language and have some prior knowledge of one another, interviews feel conversational, interviewees need less prompting, and the content produced may well go above and beyond the initial scope of the interview protocol. Similarly, external reviewers who have some degree of collegiality and familiarity with the individuals internal to the project can use a common language, understand institutional environmental factors that influence the project, and express a productive level of candor throughout the assessment process. However, the boundary between external reviewers and internal parties can become blurred if there isn't an intentional, formative review of the differences in these roles. Indeed, it becomes difficult to refrain from making suggestions (beyond that which is appropriate or a function of the assessment team) or assisting in brainstorming sessions, for example, if the distinctions between roles become conflated due to a high degree of familiarity.

Consider an audit of both existing and developing relationships using the following prompts:

1. Who do I know on campus? In what ways will our familiarity affect the external/internal relationship both positively and negatively?
2. What sorts of information and resources will I potentially need or want access to? Who is/are the gatekeeper(s) of that information? How do I best navigate institutional

culture to form a relationship with colleagues whose roles are relevant to this information?

Consideration 4: Broadly, what is the purpose of the assessment effort(s)? To whom will the results be made available, and to whom are reviewers accountable?

Schuh and colleagues (2016) outlined questions that should guide the assessment process. The top two are:

1. What are the issues at hand?
2. What is the purpose of the assessment?

Although the nature of the need or the task may initially seem self-evident, it is important for all parties to clearly articulate their perspective, understanding of the process, and desired outcomes. First, on a broad, conceptual level, what is the purpose of the work? Assessment data can be used to identify areas for improvement, but it can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness or success of an initiative. Relatedly, who is the audience for the work? To whom is the team answerable? How will the results be used?

Considering the audience and their expectations is crucial to effective assessment efforts (Bresciani et al., 2009). Assessment data are valuable to those who are in a direct position to make improvements, but evaluation data may be important to the funding agency, the unit responsible for program reviews, the senior administrator, or the office of institutional effectiveness. Although the same data inform conclusions in both scenarios, the areas emphasized and how reports are framed may differ depending on the audience and their interest.

Ewell (2009) pointed out that improvement and accountability are the primary purposes of assessment. Perhaps the most important questions to clarify are those related to the nature of the task (e.g., evaluation of outcomes, identification of areas for improvement) and the party to whom the reviewers are ultimately accountable. For example, an external reviewer might be invited to review a program in its second year of existence. Suppose the program director makes the invitation and the purpose is program improvement. In that case, the goal is formative assessment, and the visit and report focus on opportunities and areas for further development. If, on the other hand, the vice president makes the invitation and the purpose is evaluation, then the visit and report may use a more critical lens to determine whether the program is achieving intended outcomes, is cost-effective, and should continue to be funded. In this case, the review may be summative, where the goal is to provide a final evaluation of the achievement of the projects' goals. This is not to say that an external review cannot focus on evaluation and improvement or that they cannot be used for accountability to stakeholders. Ultimately, one is likely to be prioritized over the others. Additionally, this is not to discount the symbolic elements of external review. Bolman and Deal (2017) describe some common practices in organizations as ritualistic or ceremonial, as just something we do. Whether for improvement or accountability, it is important to keep in mind the purpose of the assessment, including its symbolism, and tailor the delivery of results appropriately.

Conclusion

Whether serving as an external reviewer or working with such visitors, these collaborations can be rich opportunities for professional enrichment, program improvement, and productive exchange of perspectives and ideas. External entities continue to encourage higher education to pursue collaborations in teaching and research (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Nevertheless, collaborations—particularly as external reviewers—can be challenging to navigate, with issues related to logistics, campus cultures, relationships, the clarity of the purpose of the task, and the lines of accountability. There is a saying that an expert is someone who comes from 50 miles away, and someone external to the program or institution may be viewed as more objective and, therefore, more credible. Such reasoning can lead to the assumption that using an external reviewer is always a good strategy; this may reflect the perception of the accreditation model as the gold standard of validating self-studies. However, the advantages of a fresh perspective and different expertise must be balanced with the deep understanding of those closest to the object being reviewed. Ideally, whether external reviewers come from outside the institution or just outside the unit, such collaborations offer the best of both worlds. To ensure their effectiveness and success, all those involved must commit to explicit expectations, clear communication, and honest exchange of perspectives. Only then can the full value of looking from the outside in be realized.

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Students' Mental Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Ways Institutions Can Foster Undergraduate Students' Mental Well-Being

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Abstract: College student mental health has been a concern on U.S. college campuses for decades. The COVID-19 pandemic, which started to impact operations on U.S. college campuses in March 2020, created new stressors and challenges that negatively impacted college student mental health. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore the mental well-being of undergraduate students at one large, public institution in the midwestern United States during the Fall 2020 semester. We collected data via two surveys, one at the beginning and one at the end of the Fall 2020 semester, as well as interviews at the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester. Overall, participants reported significantly lower social-psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic than pre-pandemic. Participants struggled with social isolation, academic challenges, and a lack of motivation. Participants appreciated opportunities to engage with others, flexible and supportive faculty, and efforts of institutional leadership to keep them safe. However, participants had mixed feelings about the way institutional safety regulations and information on resources was communicated. While some found support through on-campus counseling services, others encountered barriers when trying to seek help. By early spring 2021, many participants had developed their own strategies to proactively foster their well-being. Findings indicate a need for institutions to more proactively foster students' well-being during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: mental health, COVID-19, mixed-methods, undergraduate students

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College student mental health is a concern on U.S. college campuses. The number of students experiencing mental health issues has been on the rise (American College Health Association, 2021; Auerbach et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2017) and institutions have struggled to provide adequate counseling services to meet demands (Hardy et al., 2011; Sapadin & Hollander, 2021). The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which started to impact operations on U.S. college campuses in March 2020, created new stressors and challenges that negatively impacted college student mental health (Charles et al., 2021;

Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020; Huckins et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered how U.S. higher education institutions operated (Smalley, 2021). Due to concerns about transmission of the Coronavirus disease, many institutions moved instructions online, encouraged students to move home or completely closed on-campus housing, and canceled in-person events and activities in spring 2020 (ACUHO-I, 2020; Smalley, 2021). During the 2020/2021 academic year, many institutions continued to primarily offer courses in an online modality, limited on-campus housing capacity, and enforced strict safety guidelines for any in-person interactions on campus (Chronicle Staff, 2020). Policies and practices were frequently adjusted to respond to increases and decreases in COVID-19 cases on campuses (Inside Higher Ed Staff, 2021).

Changes in institutional operations along with pandemic-related stressors negatively influenced student mental well-being during the pandemic. Students reported experiencing anxiety around contracting COVID-19, fears about the health and safety of loved ones, social isolation, and increased financial concerns (Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020; Salimi et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Many students struggled with unexpectedly having to transition to an online learning environment while managing disruptions caused by the pandemic (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). Specifically, students reported not having access to reliable WiFi connections or a quiet study space, struggling with time management due to the online environment, and feeling less connected to peers and professors (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). These challenges hindered students' academic success and negatively impacted their well-being (Salimi et al., 2021).

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to gain insights into the mental well-being of undergraduate students at one large, public institution in the midwestern United States. Specifically, we examined changes in students' self-reported social-psychological well-being and explored challenges participants encountered and ways they navigated these challenges during the Fall 2020 semester. Our goal was to provide practical implications for our research site, while also identifying ways in which institutions, in general, may proactively support student mental well-being during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Guiding Frameworks

This inquiry was grounded in Diener and colleagues' (2009) conceptualization of flourishing and Baik and colleagues' (2016) Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities. While Diener and colleagues' conceptualization of well-being provided us with a way to frame and measure mental well-being, the Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities allowed us to explore how institutional initiatives and actions may shape student mental well-being. We discuss each of these frameworks next.

Diener and colleagues' (2009) conceptualization of flourishing describes an individual's self-perceived success related to relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism. Specifically, well-being is based on the fulfillment of basic human psychological needs such as competence, relatedness, and self-acceptance, as well as human desires for meaning and purpose. Well-being is also shaped by engagement in supportive, rewarding, and reciprocal relationships. In addition, a person's attitude toward the future influences their well-being. Diener and colleagues developed their conceptualization of flourishing based on previous research on social-psychological well-being with the intention of describing well-being for a diverse group of individuals regarding social identities, nationalities, and age. The conceptualization of flourishing has been utilized to examine the well-being of diverse populations in and outside of the United States (e.g., Hone et al., 2013; Munoz et al., 2020; Silva & Caetano, 2011), including college students (Grier-Reed et al., 2022; Howell & Buo, 2015; Low, 2011). DeBate and colleagues (2021) used Diener and colleagues' conceptualization of flourishing to explore college students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We used Diener and colleagues' (2009) conceptualization to describe what we mean by well-being in this study. It guided us in selecting a tool to measure well-being, the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2009), which is described in more detail in the data collection section. In addition, Diener and colleagues' work shaped the questions we asked in our interview protocol, focusing not only on mental health but also on participants' attitudes toward the future and their satisfaction with social relationships.

We utilized Baik and colleagues' (2016) Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities to guide our understanding of ways in which institutions can foster students' well-being. The framework was developed within the Australian higher education context with the University of Melbourne, a public research university, serving as the lead institution. The framework has shaped research and practice in the Australian higher education context, leading to multiple publications (e.g., Baik et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2017) as well as the creation of various resources for practitioners (The University of Melbourne, n.d.). Though the framework has not been widely used in the United States, it has been discussed in a U.S.-based publication focused on the COVID-19 pandemic (see Cheong et al., 2021).

Baik and colleagues' (2016) framework highlights five action areas that institutions should focus on for fostering student mental well-being. First, institutions should offer engaging curricula and learning experiences that foster students' self-efficacy, afford students choice and flexibility in how they approach learning, and create social connections among students. Second, institutions should cultivate inclusive and supportive social, physical, and online environments where respectful interactions and relationships are promoted. Third, institutions should strengthen community awareness about mental health and engage student affairs staff and student organizations in organizing well-being activities and events. Fourth, institutions should develop individual students' mental health knowledge and self-regulatory skills (e.g., time management, help-seeking behaviors) within academic and extra-curricular offerings. Finally, institutions should ensure access to effective services

by offering adequate resources and removing barriers that may prevent students from accessing these resources.

Baik and colleagues' (2016) framework guided the development of our research project, encouraging us to hone in on ways the institution fosters student mental well-being. We utilized the framework to develop interview questions and analyze data. As the framework was originally developed for the Australian university context, we were also interested in exploring whether this framework could be applied to a U.S. context and how it may need to be altered when utilized for U.S. higher education institutions.

Research Design

To explore the mental well-being of undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic at one large, public institution in the midwestern United States, we used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Explanatory sequential mixed-methods studies are two-phase projects, where a researcher first collects and analyzes quantitative data, then uses the results to develop the qualitative portion of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, we first collected data via two surveys in the Fall 2020 semester and analyzed the results. We then conducted follow-up interviews with select participants early in the Spring 2021 semester. The research project was approved by the institutional review board and supported by a NASPA Region IV-East Research and Assessment Grant.

Research Site

This study took place at a public research university in the midwestern United States. The institution has a selective admissions process with a 48% acceptance rate and an enrollment of approximately 12,000 undergraduates and 4,000 graduate students. The institution is a majority minority serving institution with 48% of undergraduates identifying as White, 19% as Black, 21% as Hispanic/Latinx, 6% as Asian, and 4% as bi- or multiracial.

During the Fall 2020 semester, the semester our study focuses on, most instruction at the institution took place online (synchronous and/or asynchronous), though the institution also offered some hybrid (a mix of online and in-person instruction) and in-person courses. On-campus housing opened with single capacity for both traditional residence hall and apartment-style buildings. Several new regulations were instituted on campus including mask requirements, social distancing guidelines, and surveillance testing. Information about institutional responses to the pandemic were posted on a designated website and distributed to students via email.

Participants

All undergraduate students registered for courses at the institution were eligible to participate in the initial survey. The Division of Marketing and Communications emailed the survey invitation to each eligible student (n=12,009) and included it in the weekly institutional announcement during the first week of the fall semester. A total of 1,285 undergraduates responded, a response rate of 10.7%. In late October 2020, we sent a follow-up email to the 1,285 students who had completed the initial survey, to which 631

responded. Participants were entered in a raffle for two $50 gift cards, one for initial survey respondents and one for follow-up survey respondents.

Participants who did not complete the main sections of the survey were excluded from the analysis. Specifically, incomplete responses to the measurement for social-psychological well-being could not be analyzed. In addition, student IDs were utilized to connect initial and follow-up survey responses; thus, responses without a student ID number could not be included in the analysis. This resulted in a final sample of 1,267 participants for the initial survey and 415 for the follow-up survey. Women and White students were overrepresented in our sample for both the initial and the follow-up survey. See Table 1 for detailed participant demographics for both surveys.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics.*

Demographic	Start of Semester Survey		End of Semester Survey		Interviews	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender						
Man	386	30.5	94	22.7	0	0
Woman	844	66.7	306	73.9	8	88.9
Transgender Man/Woman, Genderqueer, Gender Non-Conforming	28	2.2	11	2.6	1	11.1
Other	8	0.6	3	0.7	0	0
Race/Ethnicity						
American Indian, Alaskan Native, Indigenous, or First Nation Only	10	0.8	2	0.5	0	0
Arab or Middle Eastern Only	6	0.5	3	0.7	0	0
Asian or Asian American	91	5.7	28	6.7	0	0
Black or African American Only	142	11.2	39	9.4	0	0
Hispanic or Latina/o/x Only	198	15.6	55	13.3	2	22.2
White Only	773	61.0	262	63.1	7	77.8
Biracial or Multi-racial	60	4.7	23	5.5	0	0
Other	6	0.5	3	0.7	0	0
Socio-Economic Status						
Lower Class	113	8.9	26	6.3	0	0
Lower Middle Class	368	29.1	119	28.8	1	11.1
Middle Class	643	50.8	219	53.0	7	77.8
Upper Middle Class	135	10.7	47	11.4	1	11.1
Upper Class	6	0.5	2	0.5	0	0

Demographic	Start of Semester Survey		End of Semester Survey		Interviews	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Class Level						
New undergraduate student	291	23.0	87	21.0	1	11.1
Transfer undergraduate student	212	16.7	62	14.9	1	11.1
Returning upperclass undergraduate student	764	60.3	266	64.1	7	77.8
Course Modality						
All Online Courses	783	61.9	251	60.5	4	44.4
Some Hybrid/In-Person Courses	440	34.8	151	36.4	3	33.3
All In-Person Courses	8	0.6	4	1.0	0	0
Other	34	2.7	9	2.2	2	22.2
Housing Arrangement						
Living on campus	434	35.4	151	37.3	4	44.4
Living off-campus with roommates	164	13.4	58	14.3	3	33.3
Living on their own	133	10.8	43	10.6	0	0
Living with family	496	40.4	153	37.8	2	22.2

In the follow-up survey, we asked students if they were willing to participate in an interview early in the spring semester. A total of 123 participants volunteered. Initially, we purposefully selected interviewees to represent the diversity of our participants (regarding race/ethnicity, gender) and experiences with mental health (i.e., students who indicated that their mental health decreased drastically, a little bit, not at all, or improved). Research team member reached out to selected participants to invite them for an interview; if a student did not respond after two attempts to reach them, we selected another volunteer. Because few students ended up following through on interviews, we ended up reaching out to all 123 participants. Only 9 students completed the interview and the diversity of respondents was limited (see Table 1 for interview participant demographics).

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

In alignment with an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design (Cresswell & Creswell, 2018), we first engaged in quantitative data collection. Our quantitative data collection included the distribution of two surveys. Survey research is useful for soliciting numeric descriptions of attitudes or experiences encountered by a population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Both surveys included Diener and colleagues' (2009) Flourishing Scale, which is copyrighted but available for research use. The Flourishing Scale was developed based on previous theories and measurements of social-psychological well-being and Diener and colleagues' conceptualization of flourishing. Diener and colleagues tested the 8-item scale with college students in the United States. Results indicated a good internal

consistency of the scale with a Cronbach's Alpha value of α = 87. The scale was also strongly associated with other conceptualizations of psychological well-being. Further research supported the validity of the scale (e.g., Hone et al., 2013; Silva & Caetano, 2011). The Flourishing Scale is commonly used in research on college students' psychological well-being (e.g., Howell & Buo, 2015; Low, 2011; DeBate et al., 2021). The American College Health Association (2021) has also included the Flourishing Scale in its annual National College Health Assessment since fall 2019.

Diener and colleagues' (2009) Flourishing Scale measures one's overall social-psychological well-being. Respondents are asked to rate their level of agreement with eight statements on a 7-point Likert scale (7=Strongly Agree to 1=Strongly Disagree). An individual's social-psychological well-being is determined by summing the responses of each item. The scale is not intended to provide insights into facets of well-being, but rather provides one score that indicates an individual's overall well-being. This score can range from 8-56 with a higher number indicating a higher level of well-being.

The initial survey included two versions of the Flourishing Scale. The first version asked students to describe their well-being prior to the start of the pandemic. Statements were revised to clarify that respondents were asked to answer questions in retrospect. For example, the statement, "I lead a purposeful life" was revised to, "I felt like I led a purposeful life prior to the start of the Coronavirus pandemic." The second version of the Flourishing Scale in the initial survey was unaltered and asked students to describe their well-being at the time of completing the survey, the start of the Fall 2020 semester. The follow-up survey included only one version of the Flourishing Scale and asked students to respond as they felt at the time of completing the survey, late October or early November 2020.

The initial survey also included questions regarding participants' demographics, course modality, and housing accommodations. In addition, the survey included a researcher-created question asking participants what aspects of their well-being they were concerned about as they started the academic year. Answer choices included the eight dimensions of well-being: physical, emotional, vocational, intellectual, social, spiritual, financial, and environmental with brief definitions for each dimension (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). The follow-up survey included three researcher-created questions: One question asked participants to select challenges they had encountered in the past semester from a list created by the research team. Answer choices, which were based on our review of the literature (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020; Salimi et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020), included social isolation, academic struggles due to the new learning environment (online/hybrid), lack of motivation to complete my degree, lack of opportunities for involvement, financial challenges, concerns about family members' health and safety, disappointment as college isn't what I expected it to be, technology issues. Participants could also select "other" and enter their own responses or select "I have not experienced any challenges as a student at [institution name] this fall." The second question asked about utilization of counseling services. The third question asked participants to select the dimensions of well-being that had decreased during the Fall 2020 semester.

After administering the second survey, we started data analysis of quantitative survey responses using SPSS. We first cleaned the data, then merged the initial and follow-up responses. Descriptive statistics provided a general overview of participant demographics. We created frequency tables for researcher-created responses to examine what percentage of participants encountered certain challenges and participated in counseling, what aspects of well-being participants were concerned about at the start of the Fall 2020 semester, and in what areas they believed that they had experienced a decrease in well-being. We also determined participants' Flourishing Scale Scores at three time points (pre-pandemic, start of the semester, end of the semester). Next, we calculated Cronbach's Alpha to test the internal reliability of the Flourishing Scale (see Table 2). Cronbach's alpha scores indicated a high level of internal consistency for each version of the scale with our specific sample.

Table 2. *Reliability Statistics*.

Scale	Data Collection Timeframe	Cronbach's Alpha
Pre-Pandemic Flourishing Scale (altered questions)	Early Fall 2020 semester	.884
Flourishing Scale	Early Fall 2020 semester	.895
Flourishing Scale	Late Fall 2020 semester	.910

To examine changes in students' social-psychological well-being, we conducted repeated measured ANOVAs. We first compared pre-pandemic and early fall semester Flourishing Scale scores for the larger sample who completed the first survey and calculated the effect size of the change using partial eta squared (Lomax & Hahs-Vaughn, 2012). We then compared Flourishing Scale scores at three time points (pre-pandemic, early Fall 2020 semester, late Fall 2020 semester) for the smaller sample from the follow-up survey. As Maulchy's test indicated that the sphericity assumption had been violated, $\chi 2(2) = 6.04$, $p = .049$, the degrees of freedom were corrected using Huynh-Feldt estimates of sphericity ($\varepsilon = .99$; Lomax & Hahs-Vaughn, 2012). We also calculated effect sizes for this analysis using partial eta squared scores. We interpreted partial eta squared scores of .01 as small, .06 as medium, and .14 or higher as indicating a large effect (Cohen, 1988; Miles & Shelvin, 2001).

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The second phase of data collection and analysis focused on qualitative data, in alignment with an explanatory sequential research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Our quantitative data highlighted an overall decrease in students' social-psychological well-being and informed us about frequently encountered challenges. The descriptions of these challenges, however, were broad and provided limited insights into ways practitioners could address the challenges students were facing. The goal of our qualitative data collection and analysis phase was thus to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges students were facing as well as how they navigated these challenges in an effort to inform future practice at our and other institutions.

We collected data via semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Based on quantitative findings, our interview questions focused on the most commonly experienced challenges in the fall semester: social isolation, academic struggles due to the new environment, lack of motivation to complete the degree, and lack of involvement opportunities. We, however, also provided opportunities for participants to add additional challenges to see if other themes may rise to more prominence during the qualitative data collection phase. For each of the challenges participants brought up, we asked them to discuss how and why they were experiencing these challenges, how these challenges shaped their mental well-being, as well as how they navigated these challenges. In addition, guided by Baik and colleagues' (2016) framework, we asked specific questions about institutional initiatives that supported students' well-being, ranging from ways institutions communicated well-being information to students to actual resources that were provided.

To analyze our qualitative data, we had interview recordings transcribed using a paid transcription service. We then engaged in multiple rounds of coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, each research team member conducted a round of open coding before coming together to compare codes and create a tentative codebook. In the next round of coding, we applied the codebook to the transcripts, revising codes as needed. We then came together again to compare codes and discuss emerging themes. Last, we compared our emerging themes to Baik et al.'s (2016) framework to see where themes aligned with the framework and where they might differ. In a final step of analysis, we compared quantitative and qualitative results to identify overarching themes based on both sets of data.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting results. First, being situated at only one institution, findings are not generalizable to other institutions (Yin, 2014). We provided information about the research site to allow readers to determine what aspects of these findings may be transferable to their unique contexts. However, generalizability even at our institution is limited due to the low response rate. These findings should thus be interpreted as providing possible insights into the experiences of students at the institution that need to be explored further. Second, when interpreting interview results, the small number of participants and overrepresentation of White middle-class women need to be considered. Future research should explore the experiences of a more diverse group of students to gain insights into the ways identity has shaped students' experiences and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, participants were asked to evaluate their social-psychological well-being prior to the pandemic in retrospect. Participants may have overestimated their pre-pandemic well-being due to recall bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, general assessments of well-being such as the Flourishing Scale have been found to be less impacted by recall bias than recollections of specific emotions at a certain time (Ganzach & Yaor, 2019; Zygar-Hoffmann & Schönbrodt, 2020). Retrospective assessments of health-related quality of life are considered a valid alternative to pre-tests, when data could not be collected at an earlier time point (Lawson et al., 2020). Finally, an analysis of our data by demographics went beyond the scope of this manuscript. Previous research on college students has

highlighted differences in well-being by demographics (e.g., Bowman, 2010; Eisenberg et al., 2013; Lipson et al., 2018). Thus, future research should explore how students' backgrounds influenced their well-being and experiences during the pandemic.

Findings

Overall, participants' self-reported social-psychological well-being was lower during the Fall 2020 semester than pre-pandemic. Participants shared that concerns about their health and safety, social isolation, academic challenges, and a lack of motivation led to their lower well-being. They appreciated opportunities to engage with others, flexible and supportive faculty, and institutional safety regulations. However, participants had mixed feelings about the way institutional safety regulations and information on well-being resources were communicated, and some encountered barriers when trying to access on-campus mental health resources. By early spring 2021, many participants had developed their own strategies to proactively foster their well-being. In this findings section, we first highlight changes in participants' social-psychological well-being. We then discuss participants' experiences during the Fall 2020 semester, focusing on challenges they encountered and ways they navigated these challenges.

Participants' Social-Psychological Well-Being in the Fall 2020 Semester

We conducted repeated measures ANOVAs to examine changes in participants' well-being (see Table 3). Participants of the first survey reported significantly lower levels of well-being at the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester than pre-pandemic. The difference in scores had a large practical significance. To better understand how participants' well-being changed during the Fall 2020 semester, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA analysis, comparing participants' Flourishing Scales at three time points (pre-pandemic, early Fall 2020 semester, late Fall 2020 semester). This analysis highlighted that social-psychological well-being significantly differed at each of the three time points. However, while the improvement of participants' social-psychological well-being from the beginning to the end of the Fall 2020 semester was statistically significant, the practical significance of this change was small (η2p = .004). Participants' Flourishing Scale scores did not reach pre-pandemic levels by the end of the Fall 2020 semester and the difference between pre-pandemic and late fall scores had a large practical significance (η2p = .204). In other words, there was little improvement in participants' well-being during the Fall 2020 semester.

Table 3. *Repeated Measures ANOVA*.

	Mean	SD	F	η^2_p
Initial Survey Sample (n=1,267)				
Pre-pandemic Flourishing Scale Score	48.5	6.05	508.13*	.286
Flourishing Scale Score, early Fall 2020 semester	43.4	7.92		

	Mean	SD	F	η^2_p
Follow-up Survey Sample (n=415)				
Pre-pandemic Flourishing Scale Score	48.4	6.26	114.24*	.216
Flourishing Scale Score, early Fall 2020 semester	42.9	7.84		
Flourishing Scale Score, late Fall 2020 semester	44.5	8.16		

*$p < .001$.

Participants' Experiences During the Fall 2020 Semester

Participants reported encountering a variety of challenges during the Fall 2020 semester that led to the decrease in mental well-being (see Table 4). Interviews not only provided further insights into these challenges but also highlighted the negative impacts of these challenges as well as ways in which participants navigated these challenges and how institutional agents supported them in doing so. Our analysis of survey and interview data led to the following four themes: (a) participants struggled with a lack of social connections in- and outside the classroom; (b) participants encountered challenges in adjusting to the primarily online learning environment; (c) participants were aware of and concerned about the decrease in their mental health but were hesitant to seek out mental health resources. We discuss each of these themes next, highlighting not only the challenges participants encountered but also ways they navigated these challenges and institutional actions that fostered their mental well-being.

Table 4. *Challenges Participants Encountered*.

Challenge	N	%
Social isolation	268	66.0
Academic struggles due to new learning environment (online/hybrid)	263	64.8
Lack of motivation to complete my degree	211	52.0
Lack of opportunities for involvement	208	51.2
Financial challenges	173	42.6
Concerns about family members' health and safety	171	42.1
Disappointment as college isn't what I expected it to be	170	41.9
Technology issues	158	38.9
Other	15	3.7
I have not experienced any challenges as a student at [institution name] this fall.	16	3.9

Note. $n = 406$.

Social Connections

Participants highlighted not being able to connect socially with others, whether in- or outside of the classroom, as one of the biggest challenges they encountered during the Fall 2020 semester. Social isolation was the most commonly selected challenge by survey participants (66.0% of participants) and more than half (51%) reported struggling due to a lack of opportunities for involvement. Sixty-three percent of participants in the initial survey indicated that they were concerned about their social well-being as the academic year started. Nearly 60% indicated in the follow-up survey that their social well-being decreased during the Fall 2020 semester. Interview responses reinforced the challenge of social isolation, while highlighting where and how social isolation occurred, ways participants navigated this challenge and actions by faculty and staff that participants perceived as helpful in addressing this challenge.

Specific Challenges Students Encountered. Interview participants noted that they lacked social connections in and outside of class. They further highlighted that the lack of informal conversations before or after class further amplified their social isolation.

Lack of In-Class Engagement with Peers. Participants noted a lack of social engagement with peers in class, which they perceived as hindering their academic success because they learned better with peers than alone. For example, Elena, a Latina upperclass student, appreciated that her professor did not require much group work, as she found working with peers was difficult in the online environment. At the same time, she missed being able to learn from her peers. She explained, "The extroverted part of me really enjoys getting to pick people's brains and learn from other people who are my peers". Not being able to engage in conversations with peers, Elena felt that she not only got less of an in-depth understanding of course material but also missed out on hearing others' perspectives and gaining insights into how people think. Elena considered learning about others a valuable part of her college education and was disappointed that she missed out on this aspect of her education during the pandemic.

Lack of Social Engagement Before and After Class. Interview participants further discussed how, in the online environment, there were little or no informal interactions with peers before or after class, which negatively influenced their ability to connect with peers. For example, Danielle, a White woman who was a returning upperclass student during the Fall 2020 semester, shared:

> I would definitely say it's been a lot harder keeping up those relationships. Normally the people who I was friends with, I'd just see them before classes. I'd sit with them for maybe 15 minutes, talk to them about their day, and now I don't have that natural interaction with them.

Participants like Danielle missed the opportunity to interact with peers throughout the day. Having to intentionally schedule time with friends along with worries about health and safety led to many participants having limited social interactions.

Lack of Out-of-Class Engagement with Peers. Several interview participants indicated that they struggled to connect with peers outside of class, a challenge that was particularly

pronounced for students new to the institution. For example, Barbara, a White upperclass woman who had transferred to the institution half-way through the 2019-2020 academic year, explained, “Transferring to a new school, I’m not able to connect with that new school and that new community. It’s left me feeling more isolated.” Barbara did not have connections to campus or peers pre-COVID and was unable to create such relationships or get to know campus once the institution had moved to remote learning.

Strategies for Navigating Social Isolation. Interview participants noted how they tried to move social engagement with peers to online platforms, which allowed them to reduce some of the social isolation they experienced and improved their mental well-being. For example, Beth, a White upperclass woman, shared how regular online interactions with a tight-knit group of friends from home via a Snapchat group fostered her mental well-being during the pandemic:

> I think it's very much shaped [my mental well-being] positively just because it is very much a group where we all go in and talk about our problems. If something happens, we'll go into the chat and be like, "Hey, do you guys want to hear about this thing that just happened?", and they'll be like, "Sure." We'll usually end up being able to offer each other advice.

Having an outlet to talk about problems she was facing helped Beth find ways to better manage the stressors she encountered. Another participant, Jamie, a White upperclass student, shared how involvement in an online Dungeon and Dragon role-playing group provided opportunities to connect:

> My D&D group for Fridays, we are very active. We never shut up. I think I sent over 45,000 messages in that chat alone. We never shut up.... If I didn't have the access to things like that, I don't think I would be doing nearly as well with the quarantine and everything as I am.

Participants like Jamie and Beth found ways to move their out-of-class social interactions to online platforms, which allowed them to still feel connected to others during the pandemic.

Actions By Faculty That Reduced Social Isolation. Participants appreciated opportunities for engagement via courses, whether online or in-person. For example, Tara, a White upperclass woman, shared how one professor provided a venue for social interactions in an online course. She said, “We had a kind of mini social media thing where students would just post or they were required to post things like questions or status updates and reply to each other. So that was nice for socializing.” Tara valued the ability to connect with her classmates via discussion boards. Similarly, Susan, a Latina woman who was a new transfer student in fall 2020, appreciated the opportunity to engage with peers in break-out groups during synchronous class meetings:

> [The professor] makes us divide into small groups every week and we have to talk to them every week on Monday at 6. That’s the only class where I’ve gotten to know students like on a little bit more of a deeper level. Like what are you studying, what are your interests.

Being a new transfer student, Susan appreciated the opportunity to talk to other students, even if it was only online. Other participants, who felt comfortable with in-person interactions given strict safety requirements, appreciated opportunities to have in-person courses or at least occasional in-person activities. For example, Leann, a White upperclass woman, explained, "I have some studio classes where we can go in every now and then. So once or twice a week I'll be in the art building. And that has been so nice to just go and be there." For Leann, being able to go to an in-person class provided a much-needed outlet to interact and socialize with others.

Online Learning Environment

Adjustment to the online learning environment was another challenge many participants encountered. Sixty-five percent of survey participants indicated that they encountered academic challenges due to the new learning environment. Some of these challenges may be due to a lack of motivation to complete their degree, a challenge over half of survey respondents (52%) noted, as well as disappointment in the way their college experience turned out (41%), and/or technology issues (38.9%). Interview participants reinforced the finding of challenges with adjustment to the online environment while providing more insights into what specifically they struggled with as well as highlighting strategies they used to navigate these challenges and ways that faculty supported them in that adjustment.

Specific Challenges Students Encountered. Interview participants highlighted that they struggled to stay focused and manage their time. They felt unmotivated and worried that they were not getting the education they needed to be successful in future careers.

Time Management and Focus. The online environment created new challenges related to time management and paying attention for participants, which negatively impacted their academic success. For example, Jamie, who had synchronous online sessions for some classes, shared:

> I have trouble focusing with online classes, because it's so easy to get distracted. Because the internet is right there, and there's not other people around me, not peer pressure per se, but peer pressure into paying attention, if that makes sense. So it's become a lot harder for me to focus on stuff.

In the online environment, participants like Jamie easily got distracted and stopped paying attention. Others like Tara, who had primarily online courses, struggled to stay on top of assignments. She explained, "I was not able to keep up with my assignments as well last semester…weekly assignments and stuff that I usually remember, I just kept forgetting they exist." For participants like Tara, the online environment made it more difficult to stay organized and manage her time well.

Monotonous Environments and Daily Routines. Interview participants highlighted how monotonous environments and daily routines made it difficult to stay motivated. For example, Leann, who was taking all online courses, shared:

> Every day felt the same…. It was hard to distinguish the days from each other, because I was sitting in front of my laptop every single day and it felt like exactly the same…. So

> I would say motivation was really difficult last semester, because it was really hard to feel things mattered.

Days seemed to blend into each other, which made it difficult for Leann to stay motivated.

Another participant, Tara, struggled not only with motivation but also frequently felt overwhelmed with her academics, something she believed was due to the monotony. Tara did not do well academically in the fall; however, when she compared her workload between previous semesters and the fall semester, she noticed that there was no difference. She said:

> Well, I actually looked at... I keep my folders separated between semesters and it looks like my workload was about the same. I don't know. Maybe it was just being in the same environment the whole time. I actually started to hate my living room a little bit.

For participants like Tara, it was not just the monotonous daily routines but also being in the same environment each day, which made them feel unmotivated and overwhelmed.

Limited Learning. Some participants worried that they were not getting the education they needed to be prepared for their future careers. For example, Barbara, an elementary education major, explained, "A lot of what I need to learn is by doing. And with COVID, we had to go fully remotely and so a lot of the learning and the practicing and the doing got cut out." Barbara was worried that due to the lack of practice, she would not be prepared when starting her first position after graduation.

Strategies for Navigating Academic Challenges in the Online Environment. Interview participants shared that, over time, they developed new strategies to address the academic challenges they faced. These strategies helped them improve not only their academic performance but also their mental well-being. For example, Beth found new strategies to keep herself organized, which lessened her stress and improved her well-being. She explained:

> I've gotten myself an actual physical calendar. I went through all the syllabuses that my professor gave me and wrote down all the dates, and so I have everything marked out of when they're due. That's definitely helped me better organize my time since last semester, since now I can actually physically see, Okay, what's due on this day? What's due on this day?, and know, Okay, then I have to work on it during this period or I have to do it this part of the week because I have something else due another day and I need to give myself more time for that assignment.

Being more organized allowed Beth to stay on top of her responsibilities for her courses, particularly in the online modality. This strategy made her feel less stressed about school and thus positively influenced her well-being.

Other participants found ways to connect with peers and support each other, even in an online environment. For example, Danielle, who learned best when studying with friends shared:

> That one semester where we split halfway through, I definitely stopped reaching out with my friends and I stopped asking them for help, but then the next semester I was actually reached out to, for a part of a study group. So I was able to talk with other people who were in a couple of my classes with me, and that definitely helped. I think once we all figured out what it was like being online, making study groups and all that really helped.

Having interactive learning opportunities via a study group helped Danielle do better in her classes, lessened some of her stress, and made her feel less isolated.

Actions By Faculty That Supported Academic Success and Well-Being. When faculty were flexible and supportive, it lessened participants' academic stress and fostered their well-being. For example, Tara said, "I have had very nice teachers, especially my German teacher who was very understanding when I told him that I was going through something and that a lot of my assignments were going to be late." Tara appreciated her professors' flexibility regarding deadlines, when she encountered personal challenges during the pandemic. Similarly, Kendra, a White woman who was a new undergraduate student in fall 2020, shared:

> All of my professors, I feel like, have done a good job of reaching out to everyone in their class and telling them that this is such a big change that they're fine with making exceptions based on whether or not you can get something done. They're very understanding of everyone's situation.

Like Tara, Kendra appreciated her professors' understanding that personal stressors may interfere with academic performance and their flexibility regarding due dates.

Other participants appreciated professors' flexibility in how they chose to participate in synchronous class sessions. Beth explained:

> I know this is maybe a weird thing, but I know in a lot of my classes, we have our cameras turned off and it's just the professor's camera. I feel like that's just helped a little bit in terms of wellbeing for me just because I feel like nobody ever really looks good on these webcams and stuff. For me, it's kind of a self-esteem thing, but not having to stare at myself or know that other people are going to be able to look at me in a very large group has been nice.

Beth felt self-conscious when her camera was on in synchronous class sessions; she, thus, appreciated when faculty allowed students to choose whether they wanted to turn on cameras.

Concerns about Mental Health But Limited Health Seeking

Participants were aware and concerned about the decrease in their mental well-being. Specifically, 67.4% of respondents indicated that they were concerned about their emotional well-being at the start of the academic year. Reflecting on the Fall 2020 semester when completing the follow-up survey, 64.6% of participants reported having experienced a decrease in their emotional well-being. These responses further supported the decrease found in participants' social-psychological well-being, based on the Flourishing Scale, but also highlighted that participants recognized the decrease in their

mental health. Despite participants' awareness of their low mental well-being, only 19.3% of survey respondents indicated that they had taken part in individual or group counseling during the semester; a percentage well below the national average of 27.7%, as reported by the American College Health Association (2021). Among our survey respondents, 6.7% reported receiving counseling through the institution's counseling center and 12.6% through another provider; which supports findings by the American College Health Association (2021) that more undergraduate students participate in counseling with providers off campus. Interview responses shed lights on the challenges participants encountered when seeking out mental health resources.

Specific Challenges Students Encountered. Interview participants were aware of mental health resources on campus but several encountered barriers when trying to seek help. Specifically, participants noted challenges with availability and accessibility of counseling on campus.

Lack of Availability. Several participants indicated that the counseling services on campus were not adequate to address the demand. For example, Danielle who considered setting up a counseling appointment gave up after seeing a note on the website about limited availability. She explained:

> It just seemed busy, so I didn't want to sign up for it … I just saw something on their website that said they had a lot of people trying to sign up for counseling. So I was like, okay, I'm good then.

Danielle did not think that her needs were dire enough to warrant taking advantage of the limited available time slots. Thus, while Danielle may have been able to get an appointment, she chose not to pursue the option further after learning about the limited availability of counseling on campus.

Concerns about Quality of Counseling. Other participants had concerns about the quality of the counseling they would receive, particularly as it relates to the openness and understanding of counselors regarding their social identities. For example, Beth, who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community, was hesitant to seek counseling, whether on- or off-campus because of stories she heard from friends. She explained:

> A lot of the counselors did mention that they're LGBTQ+ friendly, but at the same time, as somebody who's part of that community, I know that that doesn't always mean that they're really supportive, if that makes sense. Again, speaking from other people I know, they've mentioned that they've seen therapists who say that they're friendly to that community, only to get there and have them either not understand their issues or shut them down on their issues, or even in a couple cases, try and convince them that they're not LGBTQ+.

Hearing about her friends' negative experience with counselors made Beth hesitant to seek help herself. While she recognized that counseling could be a helpful strategy to address her mental health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, she opted to not even try counseling.

Strategies for Navigating Mental Health Concerns. Participants who took advantage of counseling on campus found that counseling services played an important role in fostering their well-being during the pandemic. For example, Elena had seen a counselor at the on-campus counseling center prior to the pandemic and returned to counseling during the pandemic. She shared:

> I think talking with a counselor is really helpful because it is that exchange of ideas but this person is completely separate from my life. My counselor is actually really instrumental in me trying to figure out if I should stay at [name of institution] or if I should live with my parents for my last semester. That was really hard for me to decide because all my friends were over there, but at the same time, was I seeing my friends? That's debatable. So I think that seeing my counselor had a really positive effect on me.

Elena appreciated being able to talk to someone outside her close circle. Her counselor helped her work through difficult decisions such as whether to return to the residence halls for the spring semester. Counseling may, thus, be an effective resource when students are able to overcome the barriers in accessing counseling services.

Other participants opted to find their own strategies to foster their mental health, often related to prioritizing self-care. For example, Leann explained, "I think last semester [fall 2020] is when I really realized how much stress I was really under." Due to this recognition, Leann decided to prioritize self-care. She shared:

> Before this semester I've always kind of meditated intermittently. But this semester, I have tried to do that more and create more time for myself in doing that. So I've been trying to meditate pretty much every day, at least during the week, at least for 10, 15 minutes a day, just to have that kind of time to not think about anything else.

Prioritizing her self-care by setting aside time for meditation each day seemed to positively influence Leann's well-being and allowed her to better manage the stressors and challenges of the pandemic.

Institutional Actions That Reduced Mental Health Concerns. Participants had mixed feelings about institutional actions intended to spread awareness about mental health resources. The institution sent frequent COVID-related email messages and had a website with COVID-related information. Emails and the website included information about mental health resources, including counseling as well as workshops and other activities intended to foster mental well-being. Some participants appreciated the information shared by the institution. For example, Kendra explained, "Well, I've noticed all the mass emails that go out. I can tell that they're really putting the students first and care about their well-being, obviously." Kendra perceived the emails as showing that the institution cared about students. Other participants, however, wished there had been more than just emails. Leann explained, "But I just feel everything is just been constant emails for a year, and no feeling of real support. I don't know what's going on behind the scenes." Participants like Leann did not feel supported by the emails and instead wondered what she was not told about. Leann was one of the participants who opted not to take advantage of counseling services or other campus resources related to fostering mental well-being; instead she developed

her own strategies like meditation to deal with her low mental well-being. Leann's skepticism about the information shared via email may have contributed to her hesitancy to seek out campus resources.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Our findings highlight the significant impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on undergraduate students' social-psychological well-being during the Fall 2020 semester. Our study adds and expands on previous research, which highlighted the decrease in mental well-being during the early months of the pandemic (e.g., Charles et al., 2021; Huckins et al., 2020; The Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). Our findings indicate that students continued to have low mental well-being throughout the Fall 2020 semester.

Similar to previous studies, our participants highlighted that they struggled in particular with social isolation and academic challenges due to the online learning environment (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Gonzalez-Ramirez, 2021 et al.; The Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020). These challenges negatively impacted their well-being (Salimi et al., 2021). In addition, our participants indicated that the monotonous environment and daily routines made it difficult for them to stay motivated and engaged in their academic work.

Our findings highlight that Baik et al.'s (2016) Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities is applicable to the U.S. higher education context and could be used to foster students' mental health during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings point to several implications for practice, many of which are connected to action areas from the framework. First, regarding offering engaging curricula and learning experiences, our participants noted how the lack of such curricula led to academic challenges and monotony, which negatively impacted their well-being. Having flexible faculty and opportunities for social connections in and outside of the classroom fostered their well-being. Creating opportunities for engagement and connection may be particularly important in online learning environments (Khan et al., 2021) but also fosters student learning in traditional face-to-face classroom settings.

Second, our findings support the action area of developing inclusive and supportive social, physical, and online environments. In particular, our participants who were new transfer students struggled to find a welcoming community on campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research, unrelated to the pandemic, has similarly highlighted barriers to transfer student adjustment and success (Santos Lanaan, 2001; Umbach et al., 2019). Our findings underline the importance of proactive outreach in supporting students and creating inclusive communities as participants, who struggle academically or feel isolated, may be hesitant to reach out to faculty, staff, or peers.

Third, our findings highlight positive improvements in community awareness and action related to mental health but also a need for continued education in this area. Our participants seemed comfortable sharing their mental health struggles. Interviews showed that more students may have considered seeking help but encountered barriers. The

willingness to discuss their mental health challenges and seek help may be a sign of increased community awareness and a decrease in stigma related to mental health (Lipson et al., 2019). However, considering that some participants chose not to participate in mental health services due to negative perceptions about the quality of mental health care they may receive indicates a need for further community awareness, particularly geared toward marginalized populations.

Fourth, our findings support the need for institutions to develop students' mental health knowledge and self-regulatory behaviors. Many of our participants shared that they developed their own strategies to foster their mental health. Participants likely would have benefitted from having learned these behaviors prior to the pandemic. Thus, to foster students' well-being, institutions should proactively develop students' self-regulatory behaviors and mental health knowledge.

Fifth, our findings underscore the importance of effective access to mental health services. Institutions need to continue working on removing barriers to care. Counseling centers at higher education institutions have struggled for decades to provide adequate services to meet increasing demands (Hardy et al., 2011; Sapadin & Hollander, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of such services. Removing barriers should focus not only on increasing access but also providing adequate training for counselors to serve an increasingly diverse student body (Koo & Nyunt, 2020; Ridley et al., 2021).

Finally, our last implication for practice is unrelated to Baik and colleagues' (2016) framework and may constitute an addition to the framework. Participants in our study had mixed feelings about the way in which information about mental health resources was shared. Our findings point to the importance of personal outreach, as some participants questioned the authenticity of mass emails, and such communication did not seem to lead to student buy-in. Faculty and staff could play an important role in reinforcing institutional messages as well as providing individualized attention and personal referrals to mental health resources. Such personal outreach may be more effective in overcoming preconceived notions students may hold about the availability or accessibility of mental health resources and reinforce a sense of care about students' well-being by institutional agents.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the well-being of undergraduate students at U.S. higher education institutions. Our study highlighted not only the decrease in social-psychological well-being but, more importantly, the unique challenges students encountered and how students navigated these challenges. This information provides insights into ways that institutions can foster students' well-being during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. While challenges students encountered related to academics, social isolation, and monotony were exacerbated due to the pandemic, many students encounter these barriers during other times as well. Strategies learned from experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic can help institutions be more proactive in fostering students' mental health.

Our findings also indicate that Baik and colleagues' (2016) Framework for Promoting Student Mental Wellbeing in Universities may be an effective tool for institutions striving to proactively foster student mental well-being. Institutions should consider adopting this framework as they evaluate how to utilize what we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. By fostering students' well-being, institutions will not only promote student retention and success but can also promote mental health awareness in society at large.

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Graduate Program Considerations: Which Factors Matter to Students?

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Abstract: Graduate enrollment rates are increasing, but research investigating which factors matter in the decision process is lacking. The results of this quantitative study suggest that first-generation students and students of Color interested in educational counseling and student affairs approach the master's college choice process differently than continuing-generation students and White students. Program characteristics, personal factors, ease of entrance, input from others, and benefits to others emerged as important features of the process for historically marginalized student groups. Implications for practice and research are discussed which include examining admissions policies and program structures.

Keywords: first-generation students, students of Color, college choice, graduate admissions, college-going, masters' program, entrance exams college attendance

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The number of graduate students enrolling in higher education institutions in the United States has increased significantly in recent years (McFarland et al., 2017). Of graduate students, master's degree seekers comprise the majority. The most recent data released by the National Center for Education Statistics reports (NCES) reports that universities conferred 820,000 master's degrees in the 2017-2018 academic year (NCES, 2020).

The number of students of Color enrolled in master's degree programs is rising with the general increase, and students of Color now make up a more significant percentage of the total graduate student population than they have in the past. Asian Pacific Islanders and Hispanic populations have increased the most (Aud et al., 2010). Statistically, first-generation undergraduate students are more likely to come from underrepresented backgrounds than continuing-generation students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2016; Redford et al., 2017), and it is logical that the same is true of graduate students.

The NCES consistently maintains numbers on national enrollment, attainment, and composition. The data indicates an increase in the number of first-generation students enrolling, but also a disparity in graduation rates between first-generation college students and those who are continuing-generation (Lauff & Ingels, 2015). While a standard definition of first-generation does not exist in the literature, Peralta and Klonowski (2017) have studied how other scholars in leading higher education journals have written and understood the term. Peralta and Klonowski (2017) suggest "...defining the term *first-generation college student* as an individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree" (p. 635).

Beyond national enrollment data, it is essential that institutions of higher education understand how students make decisions about which colleges and programs to attend (Kranzow, 2019). In prior decades the focus has been on the undergraduate college choice process rather than graduate student college choice (English & Umbach, 2016). Scholars have a limited understanding of the unique graduate choice process of first-generation or students of Color (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Ramirez, 2013), and very little is known about how students in student affairs and other helping fields make decisions about programs. Despite the significant rise in master's degree program enrollment, the research guiding many practices related to graduate students lags woefully behind (Hegarty, 2011; Kranzow, 2019).

The purpose of this research is to extend our awareness of the factors related to graduate program consideration for graduate students in a cohort-based master's degree program related to student affairs administration and educational counseling. The college decision-making process, more often referred to as the college choice process, can be defined as "a complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training" (Hossler et al., 1989, p. 234). This definition has been effective in describing the undergraduate decision-making process. Scholars have also used the term "college choice" to describe the decision-making process for graduate students (Kallio, 1995). The authors sought to study the influence of multiple factors influencing the choice process into an educational counseling and student affairs master's program and examine any differences related to generational status (first-generation versus continuing) and ethnicity.

The remaining portions of this article will explore the research questions, related literature, the conceptual framework and methods used, findings, and consideration for the future. Findings from this study will contribute to the body of literature related to the graduate decision-making process for master's students and inform the work of those recruiting and working with graduate students.

Relevant Literature

Multiple streams of research informed this study, and each will be examined briefly to provide insight into the way the authors conceptualized the present study. These areas include information about who enters this (and related helping) professions, student college choice models, graduate college choice, and literature related to graduate school for first-generation students and students of Color.

Motivation to Enter the Profession

Research regarding who enters the profession of student affairs or educational counseling is not extensive. However, the small body of literature suggests that individuals enter the field out of a desire to work with college students in their transition to adulthood, to provide support programs and services to students, to engage in lifelong learning, and to contribute to society and the lives of others in meaningful ways (Oxendine et al., 2018; Taub & McEwen, 2006). In addition, mentoring by a professional in the field has influenced

many to pursue student affairs and educational counseling graduate training (Taub & McEwen, 2006).

As many students in the present study were focused on community college counseling careers (and were less interested in more traditional student affairs roles), it was also important to consider why students enter counseling and other helping fields. Financially, these professions are not as lucrative as most other professions (Carnevale et al., 2015), so other factors drive the choice. Hanson and McCullagh (1995) identified reasons for students to study social work, and they found the motivations were similar to those entering student affairs – a desire to help and wanting to make a difference. Duffy and Dik (2009) note that a desire to improve the world is a significant motivator for many in selecting careers, and those in educational counseling often seem to be seeking this sense of meaning.

Student College Choice

The research on college choice and selection is dominated by discussions of the process used by undergraduate students (English & Umbach, 2016). Three significant models of undergraduate college choice proposed in the 1980s – Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) have been the central models used to consider the ways students make decisions about college. These models examined student background characteristics, external influences, population differences, and the linear process from college consideration to choice of programs. Scholars later examined the influence of race and ethnicity on the choice process (McDonough et al., 1997) as well as the impact of financial aid policies (St. John & Noell, 1989), and these factors became important lenses through which to view the undergraduate college choice process (Perna, 2000; Perna et al., 2017).

College Choice Process for Graduate Students

It is unclear whether students who apply to a graduate program engage in similar considerations as undergraduates seeking to select a campus (English & Umbach, 2016). Graduate students may have considerations related to life stages that impact college choices. Prospective applicants may be considering new perspectives not present for undergraduates, such as a partner, an employer's input, or children. These can impact if or where to attend graduate school (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Kallio, 1995; Nevill & Chen, 2007).

Considerations for Students of Color

Consideration of the process from the perspective of students of Color suggests that the pipeline to graduate school can be impacted by student background characteristics (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017; Holloway-Friesen, 2018b, 2021, 2023; Kranzow, 2019, Kranzow & Hyland, 2011; Meyers, 2017; Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009). In addition, influencing factors include location/residence, financial assistance, the influence of significant others, program faculty, the reputation of the program, and characteristics of the graduate program (Holloway-Friesen, 2018a; 2021; Kranzow & Hyland, 2011; Ramirez, 2013).

Unfortunately, in the majority of research examining graduate student choice, participants are composed highly or exclusively of doctoral students (Kranzow, 2019; Poock & Love,

2001), and studies which differentiate based on level of graduate study (master's compared to doctoral) is dearth (English & Umbach, 2016). This study uses exclusively master's degree students and offers clarity in this regard.

Graduate College Choice - First-Generation Graduate Students and Students of Color

Recruiting diverse populations into student affairs and other helping professions is important to the fields for the sake of equal access to professions, strengthening the professions with diverse perspectives, and the ability to support the growing diversity of populations seeking more representation on campus (Holloway-Friesen, 2018a, 2022, Jones et al. 2002; Oxendine et al., 2018; Taub & McEwan, 2006; Vasquez et al., 2006). Research related to recruiting more diverse populations into various helping field graduate degree programs is becoming more common (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017; Meyers, 2017; Vasquez et al., 2006). Examining how to recruit diverse groups of students into the helping professions provides understanding about what these students need and are looking for in terms of professional support. Overall, a better understanding of the impact of ethnicity and generation status on specific graduate school considerations is needed. (Perna, 2004). While information regarding graduate college choice (in general) is limited, research on students of Color and first-generation graduate student college choice is even more so (Kranzow, 2019; Ramirez, 2013; Tate et al., 2015). Part of this is that until the last decade, many studies failed to examine race, gender, and class issues in the graduate decision process (Ramirez, 2013), and the same holds for generational status (Kranzow, 2019). Literature does recognize that students whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree attend graduate school at lower rates (Nevill & Chen, 2007; Redford et al., 2017).

There is evidence to suggest that first-generation students consider many of the same factors as continuing-generation students when selecting a graduate program – program quality, faculty, institutional reputation, cost, financial aid, institutional location, faculty-interactions, climate, and sense of belonging (Holloway-Friesen, 2018b, 2018c, 2023; Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009; Ramirez, 2013).

Much like first-generation students at the undergraduate level, a lack of accurate information related to graduate education exists for first-generation graduate students (Meyers, 2017). Some of the critical information relates to funding, aid, and student debt. Morelon-Quainoo et al. (2009) examined program cost concerning aid and noted its role in determining not only where but whether to attend graduate school. Lunceford (2011) notes the importance of mentors to guide students through the "seemingly convoluted" process (p. 16).

Tate et al. (2015) examined underrepresented, low-income, first-generation students and their intention to complete graduate school and found family values influential. Research by Hipolito-Delgado et al. (2021) notes the importance of external support for graduate students of Color in counselor education. While success once admitted and admissions decisions are not the same, these findings seem to justify further the need for more research on the importance of family on graduate school decisions (Olson, 1992; Tate et al., 2015).

A small body of literature connects first-generation students and students of Color to the factors that motivate them in pursuing their education at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Holloway-Friesen, 2022, 2023; Olive, 2014; Simmons et al., 2018). These factors include a desire to help others, a sense of calling, giving back, and career satisfaction (Olive, 2014; Simmons et al., 2018). Importantly, prior research shows that first generation students and students of Color have both independent (personal satisfaction and career goals) and interdependent (helping others, setting an example for others) reasons for enrolling, while continuing generation students largely provide reasons which are primarily independent (Holloway-Friesen, 2022).

A subcategory of motivation speaks of students' desires to benefit others as a reason for attaining a graduate degree. This connection appears under examined in the literature for first-generation and students of Color. Of sources identified, two key aspects of benefiting others were noted. Knutson et al. (2010) found that one reason first-generation students desired to complete their degree is due to a desire to help others, especially family members and those in their community who lack the opportunity to achieve a college degree. This type of benefiting others is different from a desire to help others more generally (as one would naturally do in the helping professions). First-generation students desire to help parents and siblings specifically by creating more financial freedom, opportunity, and social mobility (Parrott, 2019). Another aspect which relates to benefiting others is that attaining an advanced degree sets a good example for others in the family and community to follow (Lewis, 2016; Nickelberry, 2012). This relationship between helping and benefiting others is worthy of further examination, and the current study should lend insight in this regard.

Conceptual Framework

As this study is concerned with better understanding the factors impacting the graduate choice process for students in general as well as first-generation students and students of Color specifically, the authors elected to use Iloh's (2018) model of college-going (which intentionally avoids the word "choice"). This three-pronged model considers the current landscape of diverse populations and examines college-going through a lens of information, opportunity, and time.

Information refers to the availability of various data which can influence a student's decision to attend a particular institution or program. Iloh (2018) notes that information from various sources (including teachers, mentors, family, and marketing sources) is not available equally to all prospective students and therefore influences the choices made in educational selection. Opportunity refers to both the real and perceived opportunities (and barriers) that students have to attend specific institutions. For example, a potential real barrier might be a program only accepts students with a very high undergraduate grade point average. A possible perceived opportunity on the other hand might include a flexible graduate entrance exam policy. The third aspect of the model is time which "…draws attention to the social, educational, and historical events that may have led to a particular college decision or path" (Iloh, 2018, p. 237). Time encompasses many dimensions from the number of resources available at any given point in time to how much time a student

has been in or away from college. It also includes elements such as the amount of time it takes to earn a degree, the time it takes to arrive on campus, and the times at which courses are offered.

Like earlier models, this model focuses on undergraduate decision-making. However, this recent model is an appropriate framework for examining graduate college-going in that it considers that many students have non-traditional paths, are adult learners, and cannot "choose" in the traditional sense that prior models assumed. It further examines the student "ecosystem" in college considerations and allows for consideration of the complexities in the process (Iloh 2018; 2009). Since this model removed the term "choice," the remainder of this article will primarily use the term college-going (consistent with the selected framework) except when referring to earlier research that used the word "choice."

Research Question

The primary research question for the study was: Are there significant differences between factors considered in the college-going process for first-generation graduate students compared to students who are not first-generation status? The study also explored differences between students of Color and White students to understand features relevant to their unique college-going decisions. The authors hypothesized that there would be significant differences in factors considered in the college-going process by generational status and ethnicity. Further, the authors expected that program characteristics, input from others, and benefiting others would influence the master's program-going process.

Method

The present study examined differences between first-generation and continuing-generation master's degree seekers and their college-going process. Furthermore, it explored the unique factors distinguishing the college-going process between students of Color and White students. The present study serves as a follow-up study suggested by Poock and Love (2001) to understand the unique factors influencing graduate students' college-going process at one institution. In addition, the present study contributes to the college-going literature related explicitly to master's degree seekers over previous studies with doctoral students. Lastly, the study contributes to the scant empirical research on the college-going process for graduate students of Color (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001; Ramirez, 2013).

Participants and Procedure

The study took place at a mid-sized, urban, faith-based university located in an ethnically diverse community in the West. The authors selected the site because of its broad representation of master's degree-seeking students (3,948 graduate students; 86% Master's and 14% doctoral students). The researchers invited students from a master's degree program to prepare graduates for roles in educational counseling and student affairs administration to participate in the study. Data collection occurred in two separate week-long administrations over 18 months through classroom visits and follow-up emails. The authors distributed the survey to 173 students. One hundred and thirty-seven students completed the survey with an overall response rate of 79%. Two-thirds of the sample were

the first person in their family to complete a bachelor's degree, and 70% were students of Color. Of respondents, 75% reported full-time status. The institution boasts a relatively diverse graduate student body, with nearly two-thirds of the graduate population hailing from historically underrepresented groups (28% Latinx, 12% Asian and Asian American, 8% Black or African American, 35% White, 12% ethnicity unknown, and 3% other).

Program features. Students within the study enrolled in a 45-unit master's degree in educational counseling and student affairs administration. At the time of the study, the program provided opportunities for all first-year master's students to obtain an on-campus student affairs-related assistantship, which offered a $6000 stipend to offset student expenses. Moreover, students who opted to participate in the assistantship program also received a 50% tuition scholarship. Eighty percent of the first-year students participated in the on-campus assistantship and scholarship program.

Measures

Students completed one standardized instrument, one locally-designed instrument, and a brief demographic questionnaire.

The Program Choice Questionnaire. The Program Choice Questionnaire (PCQ, Poock 1999) identifies the ratings of the most prominent factors influencing the decision to enroll in a graduate program. The authors selected the PCQ because of its complements with Iloh's (2018) three-pronged college-going model. The PCQ developer originally designed the scale for ethnically diverse doctoral students in a higher administration program (Poock, 1997), and Iloh's (2018) model was developed specifically to include diverse populations that are critical to consider in college-going models. Based on a scale of 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*), higher scores reflect greater importance attributed to factors related to college-going decisions. The PCQ demonstrates test-retest reliability and face and content validity with ethnically diverse doctoral students (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Poock, 1999).

To establish the content validity of the PCQ with master's degree seekers, the authors incorporated cognitive interviews into the survey refinement process. Cognitive interviewing involves face-to-face interactions to review survey items in detail with participants representing the target population (Rickards et al., 2012). The authors conducted cognitive interviews with 30 students enrolled in a master's program who provided feedback on question and response wording to ensure the appropriateness of survey items with master's degree seekers. The present study builds on the initial steps of establishing content validity by Jisha & Pitts (2004), who piloted the survey with 50 master's degree seekers.

Previous studies using the PCQ with doctoral students grouped the 62 variables into the following six categories for ease of presentation:

- institutional characteristics
- program characteristics
- personal factors

- marketing/recruiting factors
- input from other people
- financial aid considerations (Jisha, & Pitts, 2004; Poock, 2000).

The present study's content validation process resulted in a slight revision of the grouping categories. The revised categories include institutional characteristics, program characteristics, personal factors, *ease of program entrance*, marketing/recruiting, input from other people, and financial aid considerations (new category shown in italics). The authors divided the category of program characteristics into two revised groupings: "program characteristics" and "ease of program entrance." Variables that focused on elements of the program itself (i.e., course scheduling, time to complete the degree, internship opportunities) remained in the "program characteristics" category. In addition, the researchers categorized items associated with supporting program admission under "ease of entrance." Below is a description of each category and its integration within Iloh's (2018) conceptual framework. A more expanded elaboration of Iloh's three-pronged model and its association with the scale's categories is made in the discussion.

Institutional characteristics. The institutional characteristics category attempts to measure the degree to which campus features influence master's degree seekers' college-going. It examines variables related to the geographic region of the institution, closeness to home, and academic accreditations, concepts related to time and opportunity within Iloh's (2018) model. The subscale produced an acceptable Cronbach's alpha of .79 (George & Mallery, 2003).

Program characteristics. Program characteristics address areas including the program's reputation, availability of evening classes, flexible program requirements, length of time to complete the program, and internship or practicum experiences. These characteristics speak to Iloh's (2018) concept of non-traditional students' actual and perceived opportunities related to their choice process. They also address features of time and their impact on students' college going decisions. The researchers obtained an acceptable Cronbach's alpha for the subscale ($\alpha = .73$) (George & Mallery, 2003).

Personal factors. Personal factors measure elements related to the students' personal lives, including the cost of living in the area, relatives living in the area, friends attending the institution, spouse/partner's educational plans, job availability for spouse/partner, and the students' ability to continue working in their current job while pursuing their master's education. These concepts relate to the viability of graduate school selection and attendance in light of students' opportunities and time constraints (Iloh, 2018). The present study obtained an acceptable alpha level of .72 (George & Mallery, 2003).

Ease of entrance. Ease of entrance measures factors that reduce barriers to the application process. It includes items related to rolling admission deadlines and making entrance exams optional. Extended deadlines and removal of exams provide students with more time to consider graduate school options and eliminates the perceived and actual barriers imposed by required tests (Iloh, 2018). Reliability analysis produced an acceptable alpha of .76 for the current study (George & Mallery, 2003).

Marketing/recruiting. The marketing/recruiting category includes variables related to positive interactions with faculty, unsolicited contact with faculty, and campus visits. It represents the delivery of and access to quality information from institutional agents (Iloh, 2018). Reliability testing resulted in a good alpha rating of .88 for the subscale (George & Mallery, 2003).

Input from other people. Input from other people describes the input and knowledge obtained through the master's degree seeker's close relationships influencing the graduate program-going process. The category includes the students' input from spouses/partners, parents, alumni, current students in the program, and professional colleagues, touching on all three dimensions of Iloh's (2018) model. The Cronbach's alpha analysis produced a good alpha level of .81 for the subscale (George & Mallery, 2003).

Benefits to others. Existing instruments that assess the college-going process lack mention of the potential benefit to others, a salient motivator of historically marginalized students. The authors developed a locally designed instrument to measure a latent "benefit to others" construct. The construct measured students' commitment to contribute to their families and communities by sharing college knowledge, mentoring, and providing future financial support. Sample items included, "I attended this graduate program to give my family a better life," and "Being a role model to my community motivated me to attend this graduate program." To establish content validity, the authors incorporated an expert review process with outside researchers. They also engaged in cognitive interviews with 30 master's degree-seeking students to refine survey items. Furthermore, the authors piloted the scale with 45 students from the targeted population, and selected items were revised based on pilot results.

Analysis plan. The authors conducted reliability analyses to determine the internal consistency of the PCQ survey instrument. The analysis revealed that the overall instrument was internally consistent at an acceptable level ($\alpha = .79$) (George & Mallery, 2003). Missing value analysis determined that 4.9% of the data were missing one or more variables under examination. Listwise deletion was implemented to handle the missing cases, within Schafer's (1999) recommended cutoff for using the technique. The missing data were determined to be missing completely at random (MCAR) using the Little's (1988) MCAR test, $\chi 2 = 3995.78$ ($df = 4669$; $p = 1.00$). With MCAR data, there are no patterns in the missing data, and missing values are not related to any variables under study (Acock, 2005).

The researchers aimed to understand differences in college-going considerations between first-generation and continuing-generation students. The study also explored differences between students of Color with White students. Student generation status (first-generation: no=0; yes = 1) and ethnicity (student of Color: no = 0; yes = 1) served as the independent variables in the analyses. The dependent variables included institutional characteristics, program characteristics, personal factors, financial aid considerations, ease of entrance requirements, input from others, and benefits to others.

The authors conducted independent sample *t*-tests to answer the research questions. An independent samples *t*-test assesses whether the means of two groups are statistically different from each other (Crano et al., 2015; Warner, 2007). Warner (2007) identified independent samples *t*-tests as appropriate for comparing naturally occurring groups in nonexperimental research. The authors implemented similar research design methods and statistical analyses to replicate and expand prior studies comparing factors related to college-going (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Poock, 2000; Poock & Love, 2001). Furthermore, the researchers calculated effect sizes to determine the practical significance of the *t*-test results under review (Lakens, 2013).

Results

Mean Differences Between Groups

Table 1 presents the mean scores of the eight dependent variables for the sample of respondents. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances confirmed the homogeneity of variance for the variables under review. The independent samples *t*-tests revealed that first-generation students and students of Color reported statistically significantly higher means for program characteristics, ease of entrance, input from others, and benefits to others (See Table 1).

More specifically, first-generation students reported greater importance to program characteristics (μ = 41.88, SD = 4.92, n = 90) than continuing-generation students (μ= 37.52, SD = 4.79, n = 36), $t(111) = 4.23$, $p < .001$, $d = .89$. Likewise, students of Color ranked program characteristics (μ = 43.37, SD = 5.30, n = 79) more highly than White students (μ = 39.09, SD = 4.84, n = 36), $t(111) = 2.15$, $p = .03$, $d = .44$.

Significant differences emerged related to input from others between first-generation (μ= 11.30, SD = 2.07, n = 90) and continuing generation students (μ = 8.44, SD = 2.01, n = 36) in college-going decisions $t(124) = 5.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$. Similar differences emerged between students of Color (μ = 11.17, SD = 3.06, n = 91) and White students (μ= 8.77, SD = 2.45, n = 37) $t(124) = 4.17$, $p < .001$, $d = .82$.

First-generation students ranked benefits to others (μ = 23.74, SD = 4.12, n = 87) as more important in college-going decisions than continuing generation students (μ = 17.56, SD = 4.35, n = 36), $t(121) = 7.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.50$. Likewise, students of Color valued benefits to others (μ = 23.52, SD = 4.33, n = 87) more than White students (μ = 18.11, SD = 4.57, n = 36) in their college choice processes $t(121) = 6.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.23$.

First-generation students also ranked personal factors (μ = 8.76, SD = 1.57, n = 90) more highly than continuing-generation students (μ = 8.09, SD = 1.22, n = 36), $t(123) = 2.26$, $p = .025$, $d = .45$. No differences emerged for institutional characteristics, financial aid considerations, or marketing/recruiting factors based on student generation status or ethnicity.

Table 1. *Comparison Category Scores Between First-Generation with Continuing Generation and Students of Color with White Students (Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect Sizes)*

	First Generation Students		Continuing Generation Students		Effect Size	Students of Color		White Students		Effect Size
Influences	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*d*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*d*
Institutional Characteristics	6.19	1.08	5.81	1.21	.34	6.18	1.15	5.84	1.07	.30
Program Characteristics	**41.88****	4.92	37.52	4.79	**.89**	**41.37***	5.30	39.09	4.84	.44
Personal Factors	**8.76***	1.57	8.09	1.22	.45	8.72	1.56	8.17	1.32	.37
Financial Aid	3.23	0.79	3.51	0.78	.36	3.27	0.80	3.41	0.77	.16
Ease of Entrance	**14.36***	3.09	12.86	3.33	.47	**14.34***	3.11	12.92	3.30	.45
Marketing/ Recruiting	7.69	2.16	7.43	2.16	.12	7.69	2.17	7.43	1.96	.12
Input from Others	**11.30****	2.07	8.44	2.01	**1.02**	**11.17****	3.06	8.77	2.45	**.82**
Benefits to Others	**23.74****	4.12	17.56	4.35	**1.50**	**23.52****	4.33	18.11	4.57	**1.23**

Note: *t*-tests were used to compare means, and scores in bold represent the significantly higher scores and large effect sizes.
M = Mean. *SD* = Standard Deviation. Ease of Entrance = Students' preference for simplified entrance requirements.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

Important to note, the effect size of the differences between first and continuing generation students' perceptions of program characteristics (d = .89), input from others (d = 1.02), and benefits to others (d = 1.50) were found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect (d = .80). Furthermore, large effect sizes emerged between students of Color and White students relating to input from others (d = .82) and benefits to others (d = 1.23). The results suggest a high practical significance related to program and relational factors for the historically marginalized groups.

Program characteristics and ease of entrance. To elaborate further, first-generation and students of Color rated program characteristics and ease of entrance more highly than continuing-generation and White students. The results suggest that institutions that offer simplified entrance plans with accelerated program tracks, evening course offerings, and career training provide enhanced real and perceived opportunities for marginalized students (Iloh, 2018).

Benefit to others, input from others, and personal factors. Motivational factors connected with students' relationships (input from others and benefits to others) proved to be among the most highly valued elements in the college-going process. First-generation students and students of Color in our sample relied more heavily on information shared by trusted others in their college-going decision-making than their peers (Iloh, 2018). Results also demonstrated that first-generation and students of Color desired to use their educational experiences to contribute college knowledge and information back to their communities.

The present study results suggest that first-generation students and students of Color may involve informational, opportunity, and time-related elements, including economic, occupational, and relational factors, in their college-going process more than in other groups. Program characteristics, entrance support, and personal and relational factors may more profoundly influence the master's degree-seeking process for historically marginalized students. In contrast, factors that apply more broadly to the college-going process, including institutional, financial aid, and recruiting efforts, appear important to all student groups in the study.

Discussion

This study sought to inform our understanding of the master's degree college-going process by comparing first-generation and continuing-generation students for significant differences. More specifically, this research examined how generation status, ethnicity, institutional characteristics, program characteristics, personal factors, ease of program entrance, marketing, input from others, benefiting others, and financial aid considerations influence the decision-making process.

In support of Iloh's (2018) model, the findings revealed several significant differences in the college-going process depending on generation status and ethnicity. In terms of the reasons for pursuing graduate education, first-generation students and students of Color considered the importance of both graduate education and a master's degree for their desired careers. They specifically considered its ability to serve as the means to an end more than their cohort peers (who were more likely to seek the degree as a way to further

knowledge). Consistent with Simmons et al. (2018), the majority of sampled first-generation students and students of Color sought a master's degree to advance their access to their desired profession and improve both their future and their families' opportunities.

Institutional Policies and Practices

Kallio's (1995) research on graduate choice decisions identified admissions policies and practices as significant in the choice process. Further, Kranzow and Hyland (2011) identify many structural barriers, including traditional course times and standardized tests for students of Color and first-generation students. Findings from this study substantiate the concept in Iloh's (2018) model (precisely the element of real and perceived barriers to opportunities) and confirm earlier literature findings suggesting that application processes and policies (identified as ease of entrance in this study) impact college-going at multiple levels (Ramirez, 2013). Importantly, aspects of the application process influenced first-generation and students of Color more significantly than other students. These results are consistent with research on recruiting graduate students of Color in other disciplines (Vasquez et al., 2006). Being able to gain admission in a clear and unencumbered way is perhaps more important for students who see additional requirements (such as firm admission deadlines and standardized tests) as barriers to opportunities within specific programs. This awareness has implications for those seeking supportive policies for first-generation students and students of Color (Holloway-Friesen, 2022; in press).

Another finding consistent with earlier literature is that first-generation students were more concerned with program characteristics, both time to degree and the specific times of course delivery, than their continuing-generation counterparts; this was true for students of Color as well. Since first-generation students and students of Color frequently indicated that a reason for pursuing the master's degree was entry into a profession (and presumably employment), it is logical that they would want to complete their degree as quickly as possible. This is aligned with both opportunity and time elements of Iloh's (2018) model. Institutions may wish to consider that program characteristics, including accelerated programs with shorter timelines to career entry, compelled first-generation and diverse student populations in this study to apply to this particular program.

Research indicates that first-generation and underrepresented students often work significant hours (PNPI, 2016). First-generation and students of Color in this study more often indicated that evening course scheduling was an influential factor in their college-going decision. It may be that students of Color and first-generation graduate students (many who have family members to support) have secure jobs which they are unable or unwilling to leave -- and therefore, this population may be more likely to seek classes in the evenings or non-traditional formats (Kranzow & Hyland, 2011). This structuring of course format relates to Iloh's (2018) opportunity dimension as students may perceive evening opportunities as accessible. Those in positions to influence course schedules might consider the course format and examine its attractiveness to students of Color and first-generation graduate students. Future research should explore admissions requirements, class, and program structures to determine how they affect different populations seeking a master's degree program.

Input of Others

Consistent with the literature (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018; Litten, 1982), student background impacted how students approached and made choices about which master's degree program to attend. Family was the driving consideration in the college-going process for first-generation students and students of Color. Background characteristics, particularly generation status, were indicative of the degree to which personal factors (staying in the area for a spouse/partner, continuing in the current job, consideration of the proximity of relatives) were important factors in college-going. This finding is consistent with Tate et al. (2015) and Olson (1992), who identified the family as a significant influencer in the choice process for first-generation students. It is also in harmony with the concepts of time (due to considerations of distance from family) and opportunity (to relocate and/or uproot others) that Iloh's (2018) model takes into consideration.

Future research might further explore the relationship between students of Color and first-generation graduate students and their understanding of various types of information. As Ramirez (2011) found, those who are the first in their family to attend graduate school may not recognize the advantage of particular elements of graduate programs (for example the reputation of the faculty or finding a program that is the best fit versus one that is merely accessible) and therefore rely on other components more heavily (ease of entrance, program and personal characteristics). As the college-going model suggests, information is a critical element of how individuals make college-going decisions, and students will examine programs based on what they know (Iloh, 2018). It is also possible that first-generation graduate students' ecosystems influence them in such a way that accessibility and location are more likely to motivate college-going than other factors that continuing-generation students consider.

Non-Significant Findings

Three categories were determined to be insignificant in the present study. Namely, financial aid considerations, marketing/recruiting, and institutional characteristics did not vary by generational status or ethnicity. The variables of financial aid and marketing are somewhat surprising as they are not consistent with the model or prior literature related to first-generation and students of Color (Iloh, 2018; St. John & Noell, 1989). It is possible that financial aid considerations were very important to all groups, thus a difference was not significant. It is also possible that location and perceived opportunity were extremely limited such that financial aid did not weigh as heavily because "choice" was not present. In terms of marketing and recruitment, perhaps the program did not do a significant amount of marketing and recruitment to any group of students. This program historically has drawn many through word-of-mouth referral by mentors, teachers, and colleagues, and it is likely that this was the case for many students who participated. The results identifying no difference between groups in terms of institutional characteristics is likely due to students putting more emphasis on program characteristics. For undergraduate students, perhaps this finding would be different, but at the graduate level, it is not surprising that students were more focused on the program than the institution.

Limitations

As with any study, there were some limitations. First, this was a study conducted with students in one particular master's program on one campus. Program consideration may look very different for other types of master's degree programs; further research should explore other master's programs on other campuses and include quantitative and qualitative approaches. Another challenge in research related to graduate college-going is that the participants are those who enrolled in this particular program. The factors that drew students to this particular master's program are identified in this research. However, data was not captured from those who decided not to enroll or those who decided to enroll elsewhere (either programmatically or institutionally).

A significant limitation to note is that this study did not examine the role of gender, and the participants were disproportionately female. The literature on the factors related to gender and college choice are varied, with some findings indicating gender impacts college choice (Hearn, 1987; Malaney, 1987) and other scholars suggesting otherwise (English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995). Further insight and research on the role gender plays in graduate student college-going in general and specifically pertaining to first-generation and later generation students would be helpful.

Finally, we did not compare opinions over time from one cohort to the next. This factor could be significant since asking students in the second year to recall their choice process clearly could have confounded the data. Further studies might gather data early in the first semester to capture it when student recall is likely to be sharp.

Concluding Thoughts

While there remains a great deal that we do not understand about the factors involved in graduate student college-going decision process, this study offers additional insight into factors important for those seeking a master's degree in a specific field at a particular campus. Additionally, this study sheds light on some of the apparent differences in the considerations between students of Color, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students applying to a master's program. As master's degree programs seek to attract and retain first-generation students and students of Color, it is essential that educators understand those elements of college-going that are most important to them, and that they provide the information and opportunities needed for them to succeed.

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Pathways into the Profession: Student Affairs Professionals Tell All

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Abstract: Student affairs professionals often find their way to the field on accident rather than on purpose. This study explored avenues used by current student affairs professionals to enter the profession. Content analysis of open-ended responses revealed six themes related to how participants found their way into the profession. Findings can be utilized by student affairs preparatory programs, undergraduate recruitment programs, and higher education professional associations to better serve their target or current constituencies.

Keywords: student affairs, pathways, content analysis

Colleges and universities do not currently offer undergraduate degrees in student affairs, making the field a "hidden profession" (Richmond & Sherman, 1991, p.8). Brown (1987) noted, "people enter student affairs careers by accident or by quirk, rather than by design" (p. 5). In an effort to expose undergraduate students and potential student affairs professionals to the field, professional associations like NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) and ACPA (College Student Educators International) have designated the month of October as *Careers in Student Affairs Month*. During this month, professional associations as well as higher education institutions are encouraged to host programs, distribute marketing materials, and solicit students who may be interested in entering the profession in effort to continue to feed the pipeline of individuals entering the profession. Even with such coordinated efforts to grow the profession, why, how, and through what means professionals discover this hidden profession remains inconclusive. Thus, understanding professional pathways may aid student affairs professional associations and preparatory programs in developing effective recruitment programs. Now, maybe more than ever, with the *Great Resignation* occurring in higher education and other industries due to the COVID-19 pandemic it is imperative we understand the pathways which led professionals to the field in the first place.

Review of Literature

Intentional and detailed analysis of student affairs professionals remains markedly sparse (Biddix, 2013; Daniel, 2011, Harper & Kimbrough, 2005; Turrentine & Conley, 2001; Twale 2005) as well as 10 – 20 years old. Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) examined the career paths and aspirations of chief student affairs officers (CSAO), noting that they are often internal hires and "the pipeline into the CSAO position runs strongly through student affairs divisions" (p. 12). While identifying pathways into CSAO positions, Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) did not identify and describe the original pathway of the CSAO into the field of student affairs. The most recent comprehensive analysis of the demographic makeup of

student affairs professionals is from a 2001 study from Turrentine and Conley. In their research, Turrentine and Conley (2001) pointed out that no unique, authoritative source of information about candidates in the field of student affairs exists, and therefore resorted to using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to gather data for graduate students not yet in the job field. Some popular press platforms like Higher Ed Dive (2018), have explored the unrepresentative nature of student affairs professionals compared to college student demographics from a 2018 report from College and University Professional Association for Human Resources. They cite that the field is disproportionately women (71%) and how Hispanic students comprise 17% of the student body while only 8% of student affairs professionals (Paterson, 2018). While some criticize the diversity within the field, others praise it compared to other professions within the academy. For instance, Bauer-Wolf (2018) writes “the student affairs field is demographically more diverse than other college professions” (para 1).

Also sparse and significantly dated is the literature related to factors associated with the decision to enter the student affairs profession (Hunter, 1992; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Taub & McEwen, 2006). Using content analysis of written responses obtained from 93 students entering a master’s degree program 30 years ago, Hunter (1992) identified six themes students considered when selecting student affairs work: (a) encouragement by those in the field, (b) critical incidents, such as employment in a student affairs area while an undergraduate student; (c) shared values with student affairs professionals, (d) others’ reactions to employment in student affairs, (e) uncertainty about career paths in student affairs, and (f) a desire to improve campus life.

In their study of 300 students enrolled in 24 master’s programs in college student personnel/higher education, Taub and McEwen (2006) noted, “respondents typically became aware of student affairs as a profession late in their careers (junior year or later) and were likely to have first considered it for themselves even later” (p. 210). Results of the study also showed that the majority of respondents were influenced and encouraged to enter the profession by a specific person(s) and were attracted to student affairs for a variety of reasons, including working on a college campus, the ability to do personally fulfilling work, providing programs and services, the ability to continue learning in an educational environment, and the variety within student affairs work.

The Present Study

Despite similarities in the findings of the peer-reviewed studies by Hunter (1992) and Taub and McEwen (2006), these are both now considered dated. There remains dialogue and interest student affairs professional pathways and their demographic makeup within popular press articles (Paterson, 2018; Bauer-Wolf, 2018). Furthermore, while Taub and McEwen identified when respondents first became aware of student affairs as a profession, neither study documented antecedent factors such as undergraduate major, thus leaving a void in the literature for current research on pathways to the profession.

This study, conducted as part of a larger study sponsored by the NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education New Professionals and Graduate Students (NPGS)

Knowledge Community (KC) was conducted to explore avenues used by current student affairs professionals and higher education graduate students in NASPA to enter the profession. Specific objectives included:

1. Identify common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals in NASPA; and
2. Identify major factors influencing an individual's entry into the student affairs profession.

Methods

The population of interest in this study was practicing student affairs professionals. Professionals practicing in student affairs are characterized for the purposes of this study by the definition in ACPA and NASPA's (1992) *Quality Assurance in College Student Affairs: A Proposal for Action by Professional Associations*, which states that practicing professionals may, in addition to participating in continuing education programs in student affairs, have their identity in a related profession and participate in allied continuing professional education. The sample in this study consisted of practicing student affairs professionals who were members of NASPA between January and March.

A single online instrument administered through Qualtrics was used to collect data in this study. The instrument was developed by the researchers based on a review of literature as well as questions solicited from each of the 28 KCs within NASPA. The instrument consisted of 58 questions and included both scale and open-ended questions. The instrument collected information regarding participants' employment status, pre-professional experiences, educational experiences, demographic characteristics, and attainment of the 10 ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas. Content validity was established from the literature, specifically the 2015 ACPA and NASPA professional competencies. To establish content and face validity, the instrument was evaluated by a panel of experts consisting of student affairs professionals not affiliated with the research team with assessment and research backgrounds. Reliability analyses, such as internal consistency, were not appropriate due to the nature of the self-reported data collected.

Due to organizational policies and procedures, researchers were unable to contact NASPA members directly to invite them to participate in the study. Therefore, a snowball sampling technique was employed. Using the KC leadership teams as gatekeepers, each KC chair or co-chair was asked to invite their KC members to participate in the study. Following the Tailored Design Method (Dillman et al., 2009), KC leaders were encouraged to send three standardized reminder emails to the members of their KC encouraging participation in the study. As Dillman and associates (2009) recommend, personalized elements were incorporated within the recruitment emails such as KC name, region, NASPA membership, and at times professional level within the student affairs field. A total of 1,366 self-identified student affairs professionals participated in this study.

Data from questions included in the pre-professional experiences and educational experiences sections of the instrument were used in the present study. To accomplish the first objective, descriptive statistics including frequencies and measures of central

tendency were reported. To accomplish objective two, this study utilized a basic, qualitative study approach (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, content analysis of data from open-ended question responses was employed. “Content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way, through an analysis of their communications” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 472). As Patton (2002) noted, “content analysis, then, involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data'' (p. 463).

Prior to analysis, data were unitized such that only one idea was found within each unit of data (Erlandson et al., 1983). A total of 2052 thought units were identified and included in analysis. A “start-list” of codes was created by the researchers prior to coding based on the review of the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1984). While this provided a base for coding the data, the codes were revised, eliminated, or added as necessary. To ensure consistency of the codes, researchers coded the responses collectively. Codes that were considered trustworthy, when saturation of the data occurred, were combined into themes to reduce and generate the meaning of the data (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Thought units that did not fit into a developing theme were set aside. Two common methods of interpreting content analysis data were used: (a) the use of frequencies and the percentage and/or proportion of particular occurrences to total occurrences and (b) the use of codes and themes to help organize the content and arrive at a narrative description of the findings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

Results

Objective one sought to identify common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals. Using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2010 Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP), survey respondents selected the undergraduate major that best relates to or reflects their degree. The CIP is a taxonomic coding scheme for instructional programs. Its purpose “is to facilitate the organization, collection, and reporting of fields of study and program completions” (National Center of Educational Statistics, 2010, p. 1). This system of classification was utilized in a drop-down question format by the researchers due to the various institutional types, degree programs, and major names respondents may have encountered at their individual institutions where they completed their degree(s). This classification system provides a robust listing and organization plus is also sensitive to international classifications by Canada and Europe where participants may have completed their degrees. The CIP-2010 editions utilized for this study contains 47 series, or categories, which organize over 400 majors for respondents to choose from. Series 60, or the major category known as Residency Programs which include medical residencies, were omitted for the purposes of this study. This series was omitted due to the focus on undergraduate degree attainment which the question sought responses. Table 1 presents the top ten frequency counts by the major series.

Table 1. *Frequencies of Top Ten Undergraduate Majors by Series of Student Affairs Professionals*.

Major	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Business, Management, Marketing and Related Support	188	17.26
Social Science	169	15.52
Psychology	152	13.96
Communication, Journalism, and Related Programs	112	10.28
Education	97	8.91
Visual and Performing Arts	86	7.90
English Language and Literature	68	6.24
History	45	4.13
Liberal Arts and Science, General Study	32	2.94
Biological and Biomedical Science	29	2.66

Objective two sought to identify major factors influencing an individual's entry into the student affairs profession. Although some of the themes overlapped, content analysis of the participant's thought units revealed six themes related to how participants found their way into the student affairs profession: (a) undergraduate experience, (b) higher education setting, (c) nature of student affairs work, (d) encouragement by another, (e) career change, and (f) happenstance.

Undergraduate Experience

The first, and the most dominant, theme was related to participants' undergraduate experience. Of the 2052 total thought units, 614 (29.92%) referenced experience(s) during their undergraduate career as related to their entry into the profession. Within the undergraduate experience theme, five sub-themes emerged: (a) overall experience, (b) work in student affairs, (c) student organization/co-curricular involvement, (d) academic experience, and (e) negative undergraduate experience(s).

Some participants shared general comments about their undergraduate experience as a factor influencing their entry into the profession. For example, a Latino, male, senior-level student affairs professional reported that his "undergraduate experience led me to consider entering the field." One Biracial female mid-level participant shared, "Loved my undergraduate experience." Similarly, a White female senior-level participant stated, "Had a transformative experience as an undergrad, decided to pursue student affairs as a result."

Many participants shared that it was because of their experience working in student affairs areas, such as being a resident advisor or peer mentor, as an undergraduate that led them to the profession. "It was an absolute fit after being a Resident Assistant for about 2 months" stated a White male mid-level participant. A White female new professional

shared that she entered the profession because, “as an undergraduate student worker, I worked as a peer academic advisor in the College of Business.”

Involvement in student organizations and co-curricular activities was another prevalent factor described by student affairs professionals in NASPA as influencing their entry into the profession. “I was very involved as a student leader in college” noted a Black male new professional. A Latina female graduate student stated, “I was very involved with organizations and clubs on campus, which I really enjoyed.” Similarly, a White, male, mid-level student affairs professional shared, “As a heavily involved undergraduate student, [I] realized that I could get paid to do the things I enjoyed doing voluntarily.”

Undergraduate academic experiences led some participants to enter the student affairs profession as well. For example, a White female senior-level student affairs professional noted that her entry into the profession “started with piecing together an undergraduate degree,” while a White female mid-level participant noted it was because of an “internship in student affairs in my senior year.”

Other participants cited difficulties or negative experiences as influencing their entry into the student affairs profession. A Latina female graduate student shared, “I had a bad transition into my undergrad because of the climate.” An Asian, Asian-American female graduate student stated, “I struggled throughout my undergraduate experience as a first-generation student and I wanted to give back to students who were struggling in the same ways I did.”

Higher Education Setting

The second theme that emerged as a factor influencing student affairs professionals in NASPA to enter the profession was the higher education setting itself. A total of 373 (18.18%) of the 2052 total thought units were reflective of this theme. Within the higher education setting theme, three sub-themes emerged: (a) the college campus environment, (b) previous experience working in the higher education setting, and (c) the opportunity to continue with and/or finance graduate education.

Participants who made comments related to the college campus environment often noted positive experiences and/or preferences related to college communities. One White female vice president explained that she “loved the college environment and wanted to continue.” A White female graduate student noted, “I did not want to leave the intellectual culture that is inherently intertwined in the field of higher education.” Another White female graduate student shared, “I was on campus at my undergraduate institution [and] a light bulb went off --- I realized that I wanted to work on college campuses.”

The second sub-theme that emerged from the higher education setting theme stemmed from participants having previous work experience in the higher education setting. While similar to the college campus environment sub-theme, it was evident that participants who made comments related to this sub-theme had previous experience working on a college campus. A White female mid-level student affairs professional noted, “I started working at a small community college and realized how much I enjoyed the higher ed environment.” A

Biracial female mid-level participant shared that she had “worked in college admissions for 4 years prior to attending graduate school.”

The opportunity to continue with and/or finance graduate education emerged as the third sub-theme in the higher education theme area. One White female senior-level student affairs professional shared that she “began doing res life as a graduate student to make extra money.” Similarly, a White female new professional explained “I had a graduate assistantship within campus life and then Residence Life.” It appeared that some pathways into the profession were afforded due to tuition remission and/or stipends for student affairs graduate assistantships.

Nature of Student Affairs Work

The nature of student affairs work emerged as the third factor accounting for 354 (17.25%) of the 2052 total thought units included in the study. The nature of the work also had noticeable sub-themes to the researchers. Nature of student affairs work served as an umbrella to encompass the two sub-themes of (a) skill alignment to a student affairs role, and (b) attitude or passions of the nature of the work.

Skill alignment was the more salient of the two sub-themes within the larger theme of nature of student affairs work. To depict the theme, a White female graduate student described her pathway to the profession as simply “it seemed to fit my skills and interests.” Another White male mid-level professional discovered “that I could apply my social work theory and practice to student affairs work.” The concept of skill alignment was named by some respondents as transferable skills. For instance, a White female new professional said, “I felt as though my bachelor's degree lent me a lot of transferable skills that I could use in student affairs.” Additionally, a White female mid-level professional echoed the transferable skills connection when she shared “when I was given the opportunity to work with adults at a professional school level I was happy to take on the challenge for my transferable skills were well suited.” Transferable skills and their alignment with the nature of student affairs work was an emergent pathway for respondents in the study.

Attitude and passion of student affairs professionals was the other nature of student affairs work sub-theme. This sub-theme was described by an Asian, female new professional who expressed “I was exhausted but exhilarated by this work” as her motivation into the profession. Additionally, a White female graduate student reflected that:

> It took me a while to come around to the idea, but the more time wore on, the more I realized how much I loved resourcing students with tools to help them succeed and preparing them to be the best leaders possible.

Similar sentiments for passion and attitude related to the nature of the work were highlighted by a White, female, senior-level student affairs professional. She recalled “this is where my heart is, I just needed my head to figure that out.” Lastly, this sub-theme was captured by a White female mid-level professional that for her pursuing the profession was about “passion over money.” These reflections on professionals’ pathways in the profession describe the nature of student affairs work being their motivation.

Encouragement by Another

Encouragement by another emerged as the fourth major factor influencing interest in the student affairs profession. A total of 345 (16.81%) of the thought units were related to this theme. The theme is broken down into two sub-themes: (a) encouragement by a mentor and (b) encouragement from a network influence. The difference between the sub-themes has to do with the relationship between the information giver and the student affairs professional. These reflections on the impact another person has on current professionals and graduate students describes how other people can influence a person's decision to enter the student affairs profession.

Encouragement by a mentor represents the respondents who were persuaded into the student affairs profession because of a mentor or role model. A White female mid-level professional described it aptly as, "I was persuaded by a mentor who alerted me of the field and I fell in love with it." A Black female mid-level professional stated, "I had a great mentor that talked to me about the profession and hired me for a grad assistant position." Another White male mid-level professional said, "[I] had an incredible mentor who invested in me personally and professionally."

Encouragement from a network connection is a phenomenon that leads individuals into the student affairs profession. A White female new professional stated, "I was shoulder tapped by the Director of Housing to consider higher education instead of secondary education, the field I was pursuing." An Asian, female new professional describes the nonchalant nature of the network nudge when she said, "I asked my supervisor how did she get her job and she told me about student affairs." "I had friends who graduated a year ahead of me who went to graduate school for student affairs which is primarily how I found out about the student affairs graduate programs," was expressed by a White female mid-level professional.

Career Change

Career change surfaced as the fifth factor influencing practicing student affairs professionals to enter the field. A total of 208 (10.14%) thought units contributed to the career change theme. Two unique sub-themes also emerged to further add dimensionality to the overall theme of career change: (a) uncertainty or dissatisfaction with degree/career, and (b) a second career.

Student affairs professionals cited a career change due to uncertainty or dissatisfaction with their academic degree. The respondents in the study also expressed a similar uncertainty or dissatisfaction with their career. To illustrate, a White female senior-level student affairs professional recalled "[I] intended to become a K-12 teacher, but changed path after experience in higher ed with professionals and opportunities provided to me." Similarly, a White female graduate student expressed "I was planning to go to law school, but in my junior year of college was not sure if that was the right path for me as I was prepping to take the LSATs." Lastly, a different White female graduate student shared "I was dissatisfied with the lack of career and professional development opportunities for music majors at my undergrad." These respondents all shared a career change due to uncertainty around or dissatisfaction with their degree or career.

A second career was also a noticeable impetus for student affairs professionals to enter the profession. A White female mid-level professional indicated that student affairs was her "second career." Additionally, a White female graduate student explained that "after I retired from the armed forces, I decided to look into higher education administration as a possible career option." A second career was a noticeable dimension within career change for a prominent pathway into the student affairs profession.

Happenstance

Of the 2052 total thought units, 75 (3.65%) supported the happenstance theme area. Comments from student affairs professionals in this theme area spoke to the "hidden profession" aspect of student affairs work. A White female mid-level student affairs professional explained, "I happened into the profession by happenstance and have been here, happily, ever since." An African-American male VP commented that he entered the profession "accidentally - my fraternity brother's wife worked in admissions and encouraged me to apply for a counselor position when I graduated." One White female mid-level participant commented that "it picked me" while a White female faculty member cited "serendipity" as a factor influencing her entry into the student affairs profession. Another White female mid-level student affairs professional stated, "it sort of landed in my lap."

The remaining 83 (4.04%) of the thought units were considered outliers. Many of these statements, while confirmatory, did not have enough context provided for the researchers to be able to categorize them into one of the six major theme areas. For example, a White, female, mid-level student affairs professional commented, "after that, I was hooked." Of these 83 statements, 14 were related more to the nature of questions on the research instrument as opposed to providing a response that matched the actual intent of the question. For example, one participant noted, "For the question above it was super difficult to find the major. Majors should be listed in some order."

Discussion

The present study sought to (a) identify common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals; and (b) identify major factors influencing an individual's entry into the student affairs profession. The implications and recommendations for future study are discussed by each objective and then for the overall study.

Colleges and universities do not offer pre-professional student affairs tracks similar to those offered in medicine or law. Therefore, the purpose of objective one was to better understand the common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals, however our sample only included members of NASPA. The identification of common majors will provide those individuals interested in recruiting future student-affairs professionals with a better understanding of the degree programs leading into the profession. Recruiters are often faced with limited time and resources, and an increased understanding of the most common majors may provide for more targeted recruitment efforts that yield higher enrollments in graduate programs.

These findings may be specifically of interest to higher education and student affairs human resource professionals, master's and doctoral student affairs preparatory programs, NASPA's Undergraduate Fellows Program or its ACPA counterpart, Next Gen. Many of these initiatives also seek to diversify the profession. This study suggests that in order to achieve this goal, diverse recruitment should not only occur within graduate admissions, but should begin earlier with the recruitment and selection of student paraprofessionals and student leaders. These student leaders, paraprofessionals, and graduate students should include students who come from traditionally underrepresented and historically disenfranchised populations including racial and ethnic minorities, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual or queer, and those with disabilities. These efforts should also include individuals who hold undocumented status within the United States, are considered low-income, and may be first-generation college students. Future research examining the recruitment and selection policies and procedures should be conducted to determine who is being targeted and who is being left out.

Future scholarship related to understanding common undergraduate majors of current student affairs professionals should consider a more condensed listing of majors. While the present study used IPEDS CIP listings, some respondents cited difficulty identifying their major within the list. Enabling the ability for two or more undergraduate degrees should also be examined. Similarly, a fill-in-the-blank survey item could also achieve this recommendation.

Similar to Taub and McEwen's (2006) study, a disappointing aspect of the present study was the inability to examine whether different factors attracted professionals of color into the field. Future research should consider factors for various demographic characteristics (e.g. race, sexual orientation, disability status). Conditional or branch logic within the survey instrument could display questions to unique demographic populations. Additionally, professionals who are not within the United States do not have the same requirements or pathways into the student affairs profession. Future research should focus specifically on the nuances of professional pathways in countries outside of the United States. This aligns with an increasingly global focus of colleges and universities and higher education professional associations. International students are also a unique demographic of interest as visa status and work sponsorship may impact their pathway into the profession.

Objective two sought to update and further clarify major factors influencing an individual's entry into the student affairs profession. The present study's findings possess similarities and distinctions from previous studies conducted by Taub and McEwen (2006) and Hunter (1992). Hunter's critical incidents, improving campus life, and encouragement by those already in the field were not uniquely discovered in the present study; however, similarities or sub-themes capture similar sentiments. The majority of participants in Taub and McEwen's study were influenced to enter the profession by a specific person(s). While encouragement by another was a factor influencing participants in the present study to enter the profession, the undergraduate experience of participants in the present study was found in more thought units than encouragement by another.

Limitations

Overall, the present study aids current student affairs professionals to understand well-established avenues and pathways to enter the profession for recruitment and retention purposes. A number of suggestions for future research stem from this research. While we believe this study to be sound, we note three limitations. First, the present study suggested major pathways into the profession, but also acknowledges varied pathways to enter the field. This study, or studies with a similar aim, should be repeated every 10 – 15 years to capture demographic changes and shifts into the profession. We acknowledged the dated literature in this area. With this study in a similar cadence, future research can draw on more contemporary scholarship. Second, respondent data is limited by the nature of self-report and therefore meta-major categories afforded by IPEDS categories may be incorrect. This is because respondents may not be familiar with the umbrellaing or difference in terms and classifications from their own collegiate academic structure and nomenclature. Third, thought unit analysis in the study resulted in outliers (n = 83, 4.04%) which may reveal more diverse pathways into the field with a larger sample. Additionally, a limitation of the study is that the sample was predominantly composed of members belonging to one student affairs professional association. Future scholarship ought to expand participant recruitment efforts to include other student affairs professional organizations, snowball sampling utilizing popular social media platforms, and student affairs professionals who may be embedded in the academic affairs structure.

The student affairs profession continually works to improve its legitimacy and prominence in the higher education community. In order to continue this important work, pathways to the student affairs profession are important to understand. With more awareness and visibility, the once hidden profession may secure an important seat at the table for future student affairs professionals.

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