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JOB EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATIONAL PREPARATION FACTORS IN RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF HALL DIRECTORS

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JOB EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATIONAL PREPARATION FACTORS IN RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF HALL DIRECTORS

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ABSTRACT

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Student affairs practitioners in higher education have been leaving the field at an alarming rate (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2022). As personnel working on the front lines in efforts related to student success and retention, early-career incumbents in these positions experiencing such high rates of attrition presents an existential crisis to student affairs as a profession (Fosnacht et al., 2021). This study examined the job experience of early-career housing professionals and its relationship to retention to their positions. The study received endorsed research status by Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) in 2023. The study looked at: (a) the role of hall director as a generalist and its level of autonomy; (b) short-term tenure; (c) the impact on small, private colleges; and (d) training and development of these personnel. The researcher provided perspectives into the perceptions and factors that may influence the job experience through a single, bounded case study at one housing/residence life department. Through interviews with personnel on three levels in the organization (entry level, mid-level, and senior level), and a document analysis of a job description, training, and recruitment materials, this study examined the expectations and perceived realities of early-career housing professionals. Findings revealed the hall director position at the small, private university is complex, generalist, and mostly autonomous, with ambiguous, abundant responsibilities. The work

environment is perceived as innovative and strategic, with high performance expectations to go above and beyond, and is characterized by frequent vacancies and staff turnover, hall directors challenged to balance overlapping professional and personal lives, and a perception that compensation and duties required are not aligned. The managers perceive the job skills required for the role to be technical and organizational, with graduate classroom and fieldwork preparation contributing to success in the role. Areas to explore for future research include the differences in job experience and retention between different gendered personnel, master's degree recipients in related versus unrelated fields of study, state and regional factors, and the timing of hiring cohort to start of work.
Keywords: Job experience; Residence Life; Student Affairs; Personnel; Job retention; Sensemaking

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation first to my family (all of you who are too many to list) who have been more patient than I have on this journey, specifically my loving wife, Erica, and my beautiful children, Ryan, Nolan, and Lila. Thank you for allowing me the time and space to accomplish this goal, despite my divided and distracted attention over 7 years. Education is a privilege, but it is at the heart of opportunity in this world. I hope my children can discover that hard work on their studies and persistence in achieving their dreams pays off, even when it feels like a long, demanding process. In addition, I have been blessed to have had wonderful mentors and colleagues throughout my career in student affairs, from my student days to my professional career, so I also dedicate this accomplishment to them. Finally, at the heart of the work of the residence life professional is building community. In today's complex world, I urge us to spend more time reflecting on the ways we can find common ground than on those things that divide us, for the good of all humanity.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In a 2022 report from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), workforce and job retention were identified as leading challenges facing student affairs in higher education. The report indicates that if unaddressed, the workforce challenges and retention could imperil the field of student affairs (NASPA 2022). In the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey of 3,815 full-time employees, 21% of whom were student affairs employees, approximately 35% of higher education employees reported they were likely or very likely to look for new jobs in the year ahead, an increase of 11% from 2021 (Bichsel et al., 2022). The survey identified the highest areas of employees' dissatisfaction being with pay, institutional investment in their career development, and opportunities for advancement (Bichsel et al., 2022). Employers are examining their workforce and the workplace more than ever to help attract, satisfy, and retain employees in a highly competitive and changing job market.

Many of the same concerns have been growing in the area of student housing and residence life. In 2008, the Association of College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I) surveyed housing professionals, and senior housing officers reported retention to position as a major issue in the live-in housing professional position (Wilson, 2008). In particular, perceived challenges in recruiting and retaining entry-level housing staff were found to be statistically significantly higher among senior housing officers at smaller institutions than among their counterparts at larger institutions (Wilson, 2008). Student housing professionals' perceptions of their work experience

indicated that job burnout, job involvement, workload dissatisfaction, satisfaction with promotion opportunities, and professional development outcome fairness were identified as in need of improvement (Wilson, 2008). For the hall director role, specifically, role ambiguity was a career measure that they indicated needed improvement (Wilson, 2008).

The most frequent areas identified as reasons for dissatisfaction include stressful work (84%), salary and compensation (88%), feeling underappreciated and undervalued in their work (81%), compensation is not aligned with duties (70%), and hidden responsibilities not in the job description (68%; NASPA, 2022). Among those challenges among employees are a shift in preference to remain in the field, with only 61% of employees surveyed planning to continue in student affairs in the next 5 years and only 57% indicating they would recommend the profession to someone else during the same period of time (NASPA, 2022). This new development in the field of student affairs underscores the need for a better understanding of the lived experience of student affairs professionals and the thought processes involved in making the decision to exit the profession.

Aligning compensation with duties of the position received a national spotlight with the updates to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA; United States Department of Labor, n.d.). Originally enacted in 1938, FLSA was established as a response to exploitive employment practices that would protect workers and lead to fair pay standards in the United States, including the establishment of a minimum wage and the 40-hour workweek, as well as overtime standards (United States Department of Labor, n.d.). In 2016 an update to the 1938 act extended its reach to white-collar positions and increased the minimum wage for exempt employees (Hinds, 2019). The implications of

this change were felt in higher education. In 2019, 7% of exempt student affairs professionals were paid salaries lower than the proposed FLSA benchmark (Hinds, 2019). Entry-level hall directors are among the lowest paid professionals. Within student affairs, the largest group of professionals that fell under the salary threshold were residence hall personnel, 38% of which were being paid salaries less than $36,000 per year, outside of room and board compensation which was not considered in determining salary for FLSA's required minimum of $47,476 (Hinds, 2019).

The personnel in these roles are critically important to institutional efforts in retention and graduation, which are largely studied on college campuses with the goal of improving those numbers, compared to peer institutions. Retention and persistence of college students is a key measure of an institution's effectiveness. According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, the first-year retention rate from 2019 to 2020 was 82% for first-time, full-time, degree seeking undergraduates, with higher rates of retention at more selective institutions and at public 4-year institutions, compared with less selective and private institutions (NCES, 2022). The 6-year graduation rate for students who began a bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in fall 2014 was 64% (NCES, 2022).

One factor contributing to retention and graduation is residential living. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data showed that living on-campus housing resulted in a 2% and 2.2% increase in persistence from spring to fall compared with students living off campus without family for freshmen and sophomores, respectively (Fosnacht et al., 2021). Thus, the recruitment, retention, and job experience

of those personnel that manage the student housing operation are very relevant to an institution's student retention and persistence efforts.

Wilson et al. (2016) studied the admonitory behavioral norms of campus housing and residence life (HRL) professionals and how they guide professional behaviors and found that HRL personnel with less experience deemed one admonitory norm as worthy of greater consequence than those with more experience (Wilson et al., 2016).

In 2020, as campuses struggled to meet the needs of students during the COVID-19 pandemic, ACUHO-I published a paper speaking to the role live-in campus housing professionals play and how their skills are transferable to the needs of colleges and universities at this time (ACUHO-I, 2020b). They noted that live-in professionals serve as first level, front-facing administrators who respond to a variety of student concerns and crises, serving both as experts and advocates for students with intentional programming, while providing advice and support to students serving as a liaison to campus resources such as mental health counseling, Title IX incident response, academic advising, leadership mentoring, and student conduct interventions. Preparation for these responsibilities requires an advanced degree most of the time, with 84% of entry-level professionals reported having attained a master's degree, many in the area of student affairs administration, education, and counseling (ACUHO-I, 2020b). Specifically, the report's authors asserted,

> Colleges and universities have long relied on live-in professionals as valuable partners in a broad range of cross campus programs, services, and initiatives. As quintessential generalists who have unique day-to-day relationships with their students and know-how of the inner workings of their institutions, housing staff

> are frequently called upon to share information and insight with their colleagues to help steer larger support and advocacy efforts. The real testament to their versatility, however, are the numerous ways in which they have been engaged in complementary capacities as academic advisors, classroom instructors, crisis management and care team members, orientation and admission facilitators, conduct officers, and inclusion and equity educators - among many others. It is no wonder the career paths of accomplished senior student affairs leaders often begin in campus housing and residence life, and many readily acknowledge how their work continues to be shaped by what they learned and experienced as live-in staff. (ACUHO-I, 2020b, pp. 1–2)

As student issues have evolved and become more complicated, campuses have relied on their live-in housing professionals to serve as case managers to identify and act upon concerns such as mental health and health issues, academic challenges, personal matters on campus or at home, misconduct, and physical or sexual violent behavior (ACUHO-I, 2020b).

Even before the pandemic, the need for further research in the area of the retention of HRL professionals was clear. Wilson (2008) asserted that additional research was needed to examine the differences between institutions such as public or private, institutional setting and size, as well as intentionality of personal and professional development, and models of effective mentoring and management that lead to a satisfying job experience for entry-level housing professionals (Wilson, 2008). The current study built upon existing literature and examined the perceived job experience of housing personnel at small, private institutions specifically, since previous literature

identified the perception that recruitment and retention of personnel by senior housing officers is more difficult than it is for their counterparts at larger institutions (Wilson, 2008). In addition, the average student retention rate is higher at larger, public institutions than at smaller and private institutions (NCES, 2022). The study examined the factors that influence the job experience of housing professionals and provided a roadmap that future student housing managers can use to foster an environment in which entry-level professionals want to start and continue their careers at smaller, private institutions. It also examined the intentions of student housing personnel to remain in the field in the next year and the factors that lead them to that decision.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore housing professionals' perceptions about the environmental factors or challenges that potentially influence the recruitment, job experience, and retention of hall directors. The current study built upon the existing body of research in examining the hall director role in particular, and at smaller colleges, that senior housing officers perceive to be a more important issue (Wilson, 2008). The researcher explored the job experience issue from the perspectives of the hall director and their managers, to see how perceptions align and diverge. It examined organizational behavioral norms and how those norms impact hall directors' and their managers' perceptions of the work environment. The study investigated how opportunities for professional development and promotion are identified and implemented, as well as the support structures, mentorship, and work culture that are in place for early-career professionals. It examined the structural resources, both organizational and individual, that are at play at these institutions and how they relate to promotion and growth. The

findings serve to represent various experiences of early-career professionals in their jobs, and how those experiences are interpreted by those individuals. The researcher sought to find connections between these expectations and experiences and how early-career professionals make decisions about their employment. The information revealed will assist chief housing officers and mid-level managers in HRL departments to develop and implement future practices that align with retaining personnel.

Typically, entry-level hall directors are expected to remain in their position for 3 to 5 years before being promoted or moving on to new opportunities at other institutions. When hall directors depart prior to the expected term of service, there is an inherent cost in financial and human capital to recruit and onboard new team members. The study will review the resources HRL departments are devoting to recruit and onboard personnel each year and managers' insights about those investments. Employee attrition can cost an institution in terms of dollars to recruit, hire, and train their team (Marshall et al., 2016). Rosser and Javinar (2003) asserted that the costs to an organization can include efficiency, consistency, productivity, and time, in addition to money, with other team members needing to take on the additional tasks of employees who depart (as cited in Marshall et al., 2016). The findings in this study will inform chief housing officers and mid-level managers about the efficacy of their recruitment, hiring, and onboarding process through the perceptions and lived experiences of early-career professionals.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized the theoretical framework of Karl Weick's sensemaking. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is how people make sense of the world and structure the unknown into some form of a framework. Sensemaking is made up of both

personal and interactive experiences and is comprised of seven properties (Weick, 1995). Those seven properties are: (a) "identity construction" (how people see themselves); (b) "retrospective" (the "meaningful lived experience"); (c) "enactment" (how understanding of the "environment" results in how we act); (d) "social" (how meaning is derived from a shared experience, language, or interaction); (e) "ongoing" (it never starts, it is always happening); (f) "extracted cues"("products" rather than "processes"); and (g) "plausible" ("sensory experience plus what is reasonable"; Weick, 1995, p. 17). Having an understanding of how early-career housing professionals make sense of their workplace will inform those designing graduate training programs about the experiences and knowledge early-career professional require for success in their careers and will allow them to identify the onboarding, support, and professional development required for housing programs to improve their efforts to recruit and retain hall directors. This study built upon existing research by identifying how employees perceive the processes of recruitment and onboarding. It collected this information through personal and interactive experiences that form the sensemaking of their place in the organization. It is possible that certain processes in the workplace are more effective than others, or that certain processes are not having the desired effect, according to employees.

The researcher connected the seven properties of sensemaking to job experiences of the community directors at the college. Examining the recruitment and onboarding process, the researcher probed with questions about identity construction, and how the employee viewed their role in the department and university (Weick, 1995). Each interview invited the participants to be retrospective, with questions geared toward gaining perspectives on the hall director's prior employment and educational history and

how they arrived at their current institution (Weick, 1995). The document and content analysis of job descriptions and recruitment materials and website were utilized to uncover the preliminary ways the hall directors enacted opinions about their job and the college (Weick, 1995). Questions about the relationship between the hall directors and additional personnel, including peers and supervisors in the department, as well as how the socialization process occurred for the hall directors, addressed the social context of the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). The researcher solicited the participants' stories by asking open-ended questions, which left room for the participants to reflect on their experience as an ongoing process, not just told by one isolated incident but rather a collection of experiences and extracted cues that meshed together in the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). And lastly, interviews were conducted on three levels of the organization, including the senior housing officer, mid-level supervisors, and community directors. The variety of interviewees' roles allowed the researcher to examine how the participants were able to test the plausibility of their experience, the commonality of their experience, and how their individuality impacted the way in which their organizational view was formed (Weick, 1995).

Significance of Study

The study is significant in that it further explored managers' and employees' perceptions of the job experience of early-career and new hall directors in student HRL and how those professional make sense of their experiences as they relate to their decision to remain in the field. The researcher focused on the experiences of early-career hall directors working at small, liberal arts colleges where the staffing models allow for a multifaceted roles as generalists and higher levels of ambiguity as studied by Oblander

(2006), where leaner personnel weighs heavier when employees depart unexpectedly. The current study explored the degree to which early-career hall directors' job expectations are consistent with their lived job experience, along with the critical role of mentoring and support they receive as studied by Hunter (1992), Richmond et al. (1991), and Williams et al. (1990) in their positions; mentoring and support have been identified a critical influencers for graduates to enter the field of student affairs (as cited in Taub & McEwen, 2006). Prior research (Perez, 2016) focused on the perceived reasons why students entered graduate programs for careers in student affairs (Perez, 2016). This study examined how those perceptions are met or unmet by their actual job experiences.

Previous research understanding the job experience of early-career hall directors is limited. Wilson (2008) summarized three major reasons why individuals did not consider a career in HRL, and quality of life was one of the three reasons. This study fills the void in previous research on the effectiveness of training and other professional development for student affairs professionals in preventing job stress and burnout in these roles (Mullen et al., 2018). Further qualitative research studies would be particularly valuable to identify strategies to prevent student affairs professionals' job stress (Mullen et al., 2018).

College presidents identified the mental health of faculty and staff as a major issue, and the onset of the COVID pandemic brought about a number of functions that institutions were underprepared to address; these roles are often filled by student housing personnel (Turk et al., 2020). Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) showed that student affairs staff reported stress in their work as a factor in their job dissatisfaction, and that fewer employees intend to remain in the field. Thus, this study built upon that research and

examined the job responsibilities of hall directors; specifically, this study focused on the tasks that hall directors state they are underprepared or under-resourced to perform and those that they perceive to be most stressful. This is important because previous research found that stress was a factor in job dissatisfaction in student affairs, and stressful work can lead to job dissatisfaction, as noted in Karasek (1979) and Johnson et al. (1988; as cited in Van der Doef & Maes, 1998). This had a narrower focus on a job function in a particular functional area within the field and compared employees' perceptions with those of their managers.

For campus leaders in student affairs, it is important to understand the perceptions of their employees and how they make sense of their work environment. Understanding those perceptions will aid in writing job descriptions and setting expectations that align with actual job realities. It will help leaders justify and advocate for HRL areas to be properly resourced and built to the scale of institutional demands. It will inform student affairs graduate programs on curricular areas of preparation that are consistent with current career expectations. The current study will contribute to the body of research that will improve retention of hall directors to their positions and improve the career persistence of student affairs professionals. With campus housing having a documented impact on student retention, according to Fosnacht et al. (2021), a secondary impact of this research may be to inform institutions on ways they can further improve the retention of resident students on their campuses.

Research Design and Questions

The researcher utilized a single-embedded qualitative case study design. According to Yin (2018), a single case study inquires about a phenomenon occurring in a

real-life circumstance or setting and typically utilizes interviews, observations, document analysis, and other methods to help understand the case. The researcher selected a single case study design to learn about the job experience of hall directors specifically at a small, private liberal arts college. The setting selected for the current case study is a mid-Atlantic private, liberal arts institution serving approximately 14,000 students in the United States. The methods selected to investigate this phenomenon include semi-structured interviews with seven community directors (hall director equivalent); document analysis of job description, recruitment materials, and onboarding documents; and web content analysis of the department website and specifically the recruitment landing page for the division of the college in which the department is housed.

This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals at small to mid-size colleges?
2. How do leaders within housing and residence life departments make sense of the organization?
3. How do managers or mentors of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals make sense of the organization?
4. How do the realities of the hall director position align with the expectations of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals?
5. What factors are most important for early-career and new housing and residence life professionals as they make sense of their role?

Definition of Terms

Attrition

Departure from all forms of higher education prior to completion of a degree or other credential (Johnson, 2012).

Graduate Preparation Programs

Coursework and practical experiences designed to prepare individuals for professional work in student affairs, higher education administration, or other fields (American College Personnel Association [ACPA] & NASPA, 2015).

Hall Director

Personnel responsible for the day-to-day oversight and leadership of a college or university residence hall or complex, with duties that include fostering a safe, supportive, and inclusive living community (ACUHO-I, n.d.).

Residence Life

A functional area or department within a college or university responsible for on-campus housing and the co-curricular, community-building, and educational events that occur within those communities (NASPA, n.d.).

Residential Education

A holistic approach to encourage student learning and their development in college and university housing communities (NASPA, n.d.). It is intentionally designed to extend the learning that occurs in classroom to the residential setting, with academic, social, and personal development (NASPA, n.d.).

Retention

A critical factor that impacts student success and degree completion described as the rate of persistence of students enrolled at an institution from one year to the next (Tinto, 2012).

Student Affairs

"The administrative and support functions of colleges and universities that are dedicated to enhancing the academic and personal development of students outside of the classroom" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 3).

CHAPTER 2

Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the workforce challenges facing student affairs in higher education that have been explored by leading professional organizations in higher education in the last two decades (NASPA, 2022; Wilson, 2008). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners are increasingly leaving the field at an alarming rate (NASPA, 2022). Early-career professionals, such as hall directors in student HRL, have also been on the lower end of the pay scale, underscored by the FLSA update in recent years (Hinds, 2019). With the critical role that residential living plays in contributing to student success and retention efforts, retaining staff to their positions presents an existential crisis to the field of student affairs (Fosnacht et al., 2021). Gaining a better understanding of how these staff relate to their work and make sense of their experiences can assist senior leaders in student affairs to make decisions and develop processes for recruitment, onboarding, and supervision that can address the underlying issues that may cause the departure of an early-career professional at their institution (Mullen et al., 2018; Van der Doef et al., 1998; Weick, 1995).

The research reviewed in this chapter comes from peer-reviewed journals and literature on higher education and organizational management. This chapter begins with an overview of the theoretical framework, sensemaking, and introduces four key themes related to the study. This chapter ends with a summary of previous studies on this topic and an explanation on how through this study, the researcher built upon the body of previous research.

Theoretical Framework

Sensemaking Theory

Meryl Louis (1980) defined *sensemaking* as a repeating sequence of events happening over the course of time in which individuals form expectations, both that they are aware of and that they are not, and then events or revelations take place and the person understands, or assigns meaning to those events (as cited in Weick, 1995). Bess and Dee (2008) defined sensemaking as "a cognitive process of interpreting and constructing meaning from a wide range of sensory inputs in order to make our environment more understandable" (p. 5). According to O'Meara et al. (2014), "Sensemaking, conceptualized by Weick (1995), is a way through which one understands or makes sense of their environment or events within those environments, especially when circumstances tend to be ambiguous within these environments" (p. 88). Helms Mills et al. (2010) explained, "at its simplest level, sensemaking is the process of interpreting, and making sense of, complex, ambiguous or equivocal events by assigning meaning to them" (p. 168).

In its practical applications, sensemaking theory has been used to better explain the process of understanding how people interpret the events that occur in a crisis and in the workplace (Kundra & Dwivedi, 2021). COVID-19 has caused most workplaces to face a crisis, requiring them to better understand the pandemic's impact on the organization's culture. Researchers such as Perez (2016) and Gardner (2022) studied sensemaking theory in the higher education context, looking at student affairs socialization for new employees and how faculty made sense of their sabbatical experiences. Prior to Perez, there was not an established body of research that examined

how sensemaking theory could assist early-career professionals in managing confusing situations and inconsistencies they encounter in the workplace "socialization" process in student affairs (Perez, 2016, p. 41). Perez used sensemaking theory to help explore the process by which new professionals navigate their way through obstacles and unexpected situations, and how their ability to do so can influence the trajectory of their career.

Looking at the traditional preparation programs for student affairs, made up of graduate coursework and fieldwork (assistantships, internships, capstone projects), along with sensemaking and self-authorship theories, Perez was able to create a model of how people make sense of their socialization process within student affairs and manage ambiguity (Perez, 2016, p. 41). Perez's (2016) study identified that there appear to be missing elements of the "dual training" process that is currently used in student affairs, and that attending to those elements could improve new employees' socialization and result in a more capable and devoted workforce (Perez, 2016, p. 41). Those missing elements include a reliance on "retrospect" and expecting their graduate training will be their guide for how they will do their work (Perez, 2016, p. 41). Perez found that early-career professionals lacked "social context" and compensated by using their managers and colleagues to fill in their knowledge gaps. Finally, Perez concluded that the "development and maintenance of an identity" in student affairs assisted and obstructed how early-career practitioners understood the transition from training to practice and caused some to leave the field since the ideals outlined were challenging in the workplace (Perez, 2016, p. 41).

Studying higher education personnel adjusting to new situations, Gardner's (2022) qualitative study examined how university faculty applied sensemaking to their

productivity of sabbatical events and results through individual interviews of 12 faculty members. The resulting framework for this study showed the interplay sensemaking, identity, time of sabbatical, and control had with the social interactions, structures in place, and expected practices, and the effects of these factors on faculty taking sabbatical (Gardner, 2022).

The COVID crisis provided an additional element to consider as individuals examined their workplace trials and tribulations, in addition to the confusing array of messages and instructions that were communicated during the crisis and lockdown periods (Kundra & Dwivedi, 2021). In a study set in India's workplace during the lockdown, Kundra and Dwivedi (2021) studied how individuals made sense of working remotely during the pandemic. The Kundra and Dwivedi study provides an important organizational context for the impact of COVID on individuals' sensemaking during this time. Digital and television media offered contradictory information and directions on how to respond to the pandemic, adding to confusion and feelings of "anxiety, depression, helplessness, and worry" (Kundra & Dwivedi, 2021, p. 4). During the pandemic, emotional experiences which normally enhance one's sensemaking had an opposite effect with a barrage of negative emotions obstructing it (Kundra & Dwivedi, 2021). Kundra et al. concluded that when employees are working with a "collapsed sensemaking frame, it can harm organizations and their functioning" (Kundra & Dwivedi, 2021, p. 4).

The current study examined how new employees in an HRL department experience and make sense of the process from recruitment to job performance through examining the personal and interpersonal perceived experiences of the personnel in the

organization. Weick (1995) asserted that sensemaking is comprised of personal and interactive experiences made up of seven properties. Identity construction, retrospective, enactment, social, ongoing, extracted cues, and plausible make up Weick's seven properties of sensemaking, as discussed in Chapter 1. By studying workplace experiences, the researcher gathered data on processes and practices that have an impact on early-career hall directors' perceptions, performance, and persistence in the field. The researcher studied how the employees viewed their role in the organization and how this perception contributed to the greater institutional goals. Open-ended interviews factored in previous professional and preparatory experiences and how ongoing experiences contribute to perceptions about their current work. Document and web content analysis provided contrast and context to the hall directors' perceptions and their alignment with manager-level personnel's assertions and viewpoints. Conducting interviews on three different levels in the organization allowed the researcher to check the data. Reflections on the socialization process of the hall directors examined the relationships between staff and how the plausibility of individual perceptions were tested and compared in the sensemaking process.

It is possible that certain processes in the workplace are more effective than others in developing staff members, or that certain ones are not bringing about the desired outcomes. With a better grasp of early-career housing professionals' perceptions, graduate educators can more effectively craft graduate-level training programs, and higher education leaders can better coordinate the onboarding, support network, and professional development in their HRL programs. In the end, this knowledge can improve

recruitment and retention efforts of new professionals in the field, addressing a critical need of student affairs practitioners.

Review of Related Literature

Hall Director as Generalist, Role Ambiguity

Student affairs professionals are experiencing a broadening range of responsibilities in their current roles and anticipate those roles to grow in the years ahead, as cited in the NASPA Compass Report (NASPA, 2022). The report featured data from NASPA's Future of Student Affairs Survey, which showed that nearly all of the 957 respondents indicated an expected increase in duties in at least one part of their job, with only 42% predicting a decrease (NASPA, 2022). Respondents to the survey report the increase to occur in an average of 19 different functions, with the top five being diversity, equity, and inclusion; web-based student communications (such as chats, texts, and social media); technology to engage students online; managing crisis for students; and providing an online presence for services (NASPA 2022). Student affairs professionals are preparing to take on these additional responsibilities without a rethinking of current duties; NASPA (2022) asserted that this anticipated additional burden can explain the "prevalence of burnout and exhaustion in the profession" (p. 18).

Senior housing officers surveyed indicated that 83% of housing professionals were required to live in residence halls, 12% required them to live on campus, and 5% had staff that were able to live off campus (Wilson, 2008). Living in campus housing with students means the stressors of work and life can intersect. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) cited job stress as a factor when early-career student affairs professionals start their jobs and experience the need to learn job competencies they did not learn in

graduate school (Mullen et al., 2018). Karasek's (1979) job demand control model and Johnson and Hall's (1988) job demand control support model assert that employees who are working in high stress positions, characterized by "high demands" and "low control," experience the lowest levels of "well-being," but those with higher levels of control in jobs with high demands experience higher levels of "well-being" (as cited in Van der Doef et al., 1998, p. 95).

Short-Term Tenure, Crisis in Job Retention, and Post-COVID Implications

The issue of attrition within the field of student affairs has been gaining momentum over time. Lorden (1998) referenced burnout and student affairs professionals' dissatisfaction with their work as contributors to newer professionals seeking new positions (as cited in Mullen et al., 2018). Rosser and Javinar (2003) reported that there is a "slight negative relationship" between "job satisfaction" and "turnover intentions" among employees in student affairs (as cited in Mullen et al., 2018, p. 372).

A survey of university presidents conducted by the American Council on Education identified the most pressing issues facing their campuses in the midst of dealing with the COVID pandemic (Turk et al., 2020). The third highest ranked issue was the mental health of faculty and administrators (identified by 42% of presidents), just behind long-term financial viability of the institution (43%) and mental health of students (53%; Turk et al., 2020). During the COVID pandemic, student affairs personnel were leaned on to carry out duties and to fill gaps that institutions were ill-prepared to manage, such as testing, remote programming, and communication with parents, among other responsibilities.

Added to the list of responsibilities for residence life and student conduct staff during the pandemic were having to be the "fun police," enforcing institutional mask and social distancing policies, as well as dealing with parents with a range of views on the pandemic safety rules, leaving staff caught in between, with someone in the end feeling unsatisfied (Petit, 2021). Petit's (2021) aptly titled article, "They're called #TeamNoSleep," features a narrative of interviews with student affairs administrators, who report never having seen this level of exhaustion in the field before:

> By now, everyone in higher ed is familiar with burnout; student-affairs staffers and administrators are no different. Often referred to as the backbone of an institution, these workers have job descriptions that ensure an especially trying semester. These employees deal with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, said Smita Ruzicka, dean of student life at the Johns Hopkins University. Everything from shelter and safety to civic engagement and cultivating a sense of belonging falls under their purview. Pressure? Yes. Long hours? Yes. Recognition? Sometimes, but not enough. Now, when supporting students is crucial to their success and to the health of institutions, experts worry that some employees might leave the field for good, through layoffs or burnout. By nature, student-affairs professionals deal in crisis, said Martha Compton, president of the Association for Student Conduct Administration. But "nobody's meant to deal with a crisis for 10 months straight." (pp. 2–3).

Mullen et al. (2018) found that "a small negative relationship was found between age and work experience and turnover intentions" among student affairs professionals (p. 34). Mullen et al. found that early-career student affairs professionals were more likely to

consider ending employment for a new job. Their study supports the need for effective onboarding preparation and encouragement of these employees to improve their job satisfaction (Mullen et al., 2018).

Marshall et al. (2016) conducted a study to further explore the reasons for attrition in student affairs, by using a convenience sample to ascertain actual reasons why professionals left the field. The study built upon previous work by Rosser and Javinar (2003) and Silver et al. (2014), which examined employees' plans to leave the field (as cited in Marshall et al., 2016). Of participants in the study, 34.5% worked in residence life (Marshall et al., 2016). The most frequently reported reason for departure from student affairs was "extreme hours leading to burnout" at 52%, with "non-competitive salaries" (48%), "attractive career alternatives" (42%), "work/life conflict" (34%), "limited advancement" (32%), "role of supervisor and institutional fit" (27%), and "lack of challenge/loss of passion" (23%) being the most frequently reported themes (Marshall et al., 2016, p. 68).

A study by Rodriguez (2021) examined the job experience of mid-level managers in student affairs and found that employees' decision to remain in their positions is connected to institutional and community factors. While the Rodriguez study focused on mid-level managers, it asserted that additional research on specific functions within student affairs could further our understanding of retention in the field. In particular, Rodriguez concluded that looking at the job embeddedness of staff in residence life compared to other areas and studying other entry-level positions in student affairs would help us better understand the specific perceptions of each level of professional.

Wilson et al.'s (2016) study is relevant to the current study as it identifies five

norm factors and defined the attributes and behaviors that relate to each, as it pertains to the perceived work environment. The admonitory norm factors identified included inattentive administration, developmental disregard, wielding unfair advantage, misleading marketing, and inappropriate personal relationships (Wilson et al., 2016). The study found that HRL personnel with less experience deemed one admonitory norm as worthy of greater consequence than those with more experience (Wilson et al., 2016). Female participants, employees with a lower educational level, and those participants from private, 4-year institutions were also found to have significantly more objectional views of admonitory norms in the study (Wilson et al., 2016).

Impact on Small and Liberal Arts Colleges

Tierney (1988) asserted, "An organization's culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level" (p. 9). At small, private institutions, the workforce culture is a small group of professionals, often with multiple functional areas of responsibility in one position. In higher education, personnel decisions are highly important, but this is especially critical at small colleges (Oblander, 2006). This is due to the smaller, multifunctional nature of the small college professional positions, where there may be one or two people staffing a particular functional unit (Oblander, 2006). Many small college budgets are tuition driven, meaning that enrollment revenue and student retention are key issues for campus stakeholders. This underscores the importance of areas like student affairs that can positively impact those indicators (Oblander, 2006). For entry-level professionals at small colleges, their role may involve taking on higher levels of responsibility earlier in their career with greater

autonomy due to a leaner organizational chart without much depth (Oblander, 2006). Small colleges offer opportunities for professionals to develop a more personal relationship with students (Oblander, 2006).

Smaller colleges, with smaller staffing levels can experience a higher impact as when staff departs due to the multi-functional roles they assume in a smaller environment. And, research amongst senior housing officers demonstrated the issue of staff recruitment and retention is perceived as more urgent at smaller institutions. For example, a statistically significant difference was found between the perceptions of senior housing officers regarding the recruitment ($p < 0.0178$) and retention of entry-level hall staff, with small school senior leaders indicating a larger concern than their counterparts at larger institutions in recruiting and retaining team members (Wilson, 2008).

Kortegast et al. (2018) examined how lesbian and gay student affairs professionals negotiate their sexual identity within the culture and professional responsibilities at small colleges and universities. The researchers chose to use multiple theoretical perspectives in order to challenge conventional methods of evaluating validity and trustworthiness, since the purpose of the study was not to provide generalizable, objective results, believing that the experiences of homosexual student affairs professionals is individual (Kortegast et al., 2018). Social constructivism and interpretivism were used to frame the study (Kortegast et al., 2018). According to Crotty (1998), social constructivism implies that individuals construct, rather than discover meaning as they interact with their surroundings. According to Merriam (2002), interpretivist studies seek to determine how people interpret, build, and apply meaning to their experiences (as cited in Kortegast et al., 2018). The study found that four themes

emerged: disclosure of sexual identity, enactment of outness, assumed roles and responsibilities, and recognition and support of LGBTQ activities. The participants shared they took on many informal roles regarding the support, education, and advocacy of LGBTQ students and groups on their campuses. While not a part of their job descriptions, these duties were taken on based on concern for and dedication to LGBTQ issues and campus environments that lacked support channels for these students in the small college environment.

Hirt et al. (2005) conducted a mixed-methods focus group to study the nature of relationships and rewards for student affairs administrators at liberal arts institutions. In the study, 26% of the respondents identified residence life as their primary activity, and 95% were from 4-year private institutions (Hirt et al., 2005). The study found that administrators at liberal arts colleges report spending over 70% of their time with students, other student affairs colleagues, and support staff in their roles (Hirt et al., 2005). Of the most rewarding parts of their work, the top five highest ranked were "meaningful work," "positive work environment," "good relationships/coworkers," "ability to influence decisions," and "autonomy" (Hirt et al., 2005). The least rewarding parts of their work were "office space," "performance reviews," "leave time," "advancement opportunities," and "benefits" (Hirt et al., 2005, p. 203).

Professional Training and Development

In Taub and McEwen's (2006) study of the reasons graduate students were attracted to enter the field of student affairs, over 80% indicated they were motivated to start a career in student affairs by someone else or a number of people, which is consistent with previous studies by Hunter (1992), Richmond and Sherman (1991), and

Williams et al. (1990), all of which reported that a mentor or sponsor was important to a decision to enter the field of student affairs (as cited in Taub & McEwen, 2006). Taub recommended future research into the degree to which graduates of programs in student affairs and higher education find the qualities that attracted them to this career choice exist in the actual work they are doing and how the overachievement or underachievement of their expectations may contribute to retention in the field (Taub & McEwen, 2006).

A study by Tull (2006) examined job satisfaction and turnover among student affairs professionals. The study focused on new professionals, with 43.6% of participants being at entry level, 56.6% having held their current position for 1 to 3 years, and 39.7% of new professionals indicating they work in residence life. The research found that new professionals showed a "positive correlation between perceived level of synergistic supervision received and their job satisfaction" (Tull, 2006). The researcher concluded that the positive relationship can be interpreted to contribute to "personal and professional development of new professionals and lead to reduced role ambiguity, job burnout, and work overload" (Tull, 2006, p. 227). Further, the study found that supervision that was not synergistic could lead to greater turnover of new professionals in student affairs (Tull, 2006).

ACUHO-I has produced two guiding documents in the last decade outlining professional core competencies and professional standards of practice. In 2012, ACUHO-I published its core competencies for housing professionals, providing the skills and competencies needed to manage all areas of HRL programs (ACUHO-I, 2021). The document outlined 13 areas of competency that ranged from assessment and program

planning to facilities master planning, budgeting, forecasting, student conduct, and residential education and programming (ACUHO-I, 2021). In the document *ACUHO-I Standards & Ethical Principles for College and University Housing Professionals*, the group identified a set of professional standards and ethical behaviors, as well as qualifications for college housing officers at each level of the housing field (ACUHO-I, 2020a). The qualifications include "leadership, communication, and maturity"; possessing an advanced level of "responsibility and positive self-concept"; "sensitivity to environmental, social and economic impacts"; and the knowledge of how to bring about "student learning and academic success" while having an "obvious interest and enthusiasm for working with students" (ACUHO-I, 2020a, para. 3). The housing association document, with previous versions dating back to 1985, provides the disclaimer that these standards are for program evaluation, staff training, and other purposes, but are not intended as a set of required standards for compliance and that they are not used to certify student housing programs (ACUHO-I, 2020a).

Summary

This literature review showed that on the national level, the field of student affairs is experiencing an existential crisis brought on by high levels of staff turnover, increasing rates of personnel deciding to leave the field, and a fading interest in the profession among recent graduates who would be needed to fill early-career positions. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated this trend, with additional stressors, frustrations, and new expectations, as colleges see increases in departure rates and unfilled positions. This literature review revealed that HRL professionals experience the institutional climate in their professional and personal lives as they live and work on campus with job demands

that are increasingly less congruent with their training and more demanding of their time. This literature review highlighted that those who fill early-career positions, such as hall director, are generalists at their institutions, serving a multitude of functions with a great degree of autonomy, and that institutional and community factors influence their perceptions of their work environment. The literature shows that senior housing officers are reporting more difficulty recruiting and retaining entry-level staff at smaller institutions, and that more effective onboarding preparation and support to early-career employees may improve job satisfaction. The literature reveals that early-career student affairs professionals put more weight on admonitory norms and behaviors in their organization than their more experienced counterparts, including a lack of attention by administration, lack of regard for their professional development, fairness, and personal relationships that cross boundaries of appropriateness, among others. The literature review revealed that underrepresented groups of early-career professionals are shouldering an unfair burden of serving in programming and advocacy roles of those identities, particularly at smaller liberal arts colleges, due to lack of funding or institutional support.

Further research will improve efforts to recruit, train, and retain early-career student affairs professionals in higher education. The intent of this study was to identify the perceptions of these professionals to assist their new employers in designing onboarding that more closely aligns with their graduate preparation gaps, a stronger understanding how they make sense of the organization and their duties, knowledge about the relationships and mentorship they are expecting in this role, and clearer sense of how stressors and autonomy of their jobs contributes to their desire to retain to the

field. In reviewing previous research, this study fills a gap in existing research by focusing on early-career HRL professionals at small and liberal arts colleges, where there are smaller teams, and when positions become open suffer more of a burden trying to fill those duties and maintain effectiveness.

From a campus-wide perspective, improving the recruitment and retention of HRL professionals improves the efficacy of residential programs for college students. Since HRL programs can retain students at a higher rate, focusing on these issues should improve student retention efforts on those campuses, particularly of smaller liberal arts colleges that are typically more residential.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

The current study utilized a qualitative single case study design to examine the job experience of early-career housing professionals and their retention to their positions. The case setting is at a mid-Atlantic private liberal arts college serving approximately 14,000 students. The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews with residence life administrators, document analysis of job descriptions, recruitment materials, and onboarding materials, as well as a review of web content from the department's website and divisional recruitment landing page. This chapter provides a summary of the methodology and procedures for data collection in the current study. As explained in Chapters 1 and 2, in recent years, there have been increasing levels of attrition among student affairs professionals, as well as concerns among senior housing officers at small, private colleges about recruiting and retaining their staff. Among their many roles, early-career housing officers serve as retention officers at their institution. Therefore, it is important to understand how the graduate preparation programs; professional expectations; recruitment, hiring and training processes; and workplace experiences shape how they perform in their positions, compared with the expectations of those personnel that hire, train, and evaluate them. Weick's (1995) seven properties of sensemaking, utilized as this study's theoretical framework, are used to interpret the findings. This chapter will discuss the procedures and ethical considerations that drove this study.

Research Design

Qualitative studies can be utilized in evaluation of programs, action research, and professional studies (Lodico et al., 2006). The case study qualitative methodology was utilized to answer the research questions about the job experience and retention of early-career housing professionals (Stake, 1995). Yin (2017) defined a case as "a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context" (as cited in Tomaszewski et al, 2020, p. 18). Using this definition of a case, Yin described a case study as an empirical investigation that examines the case or cases by addressing questions of "how" or "why" regarding the "phenomenon" of interest (Yin, 2017, as cited in as cited in Tomaszewski et al, 2020, p. 18). Baxter and Jack (2008) explained, "Qualitative case study methodology provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts" (p. 544). The "phenomenon" being explored in this study was the work experience of early-career housing professionals (Yin, 2002, as cited in as cited in Tomaszewski et al, 2020, p. 18). The "context" is small, private liberal arts institution with 3,001 to 5,000 student housing beds (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544).

Using the case study method, the researcher was able to create an illustration of the actual experiences of hall directors, mid-level managers, and a senior housing officer at a small, private liberal arts college. Yin (2018) identified four different case study designs: holistic, single embedded, multiple holistic, and multiple embedded designs. The researcher employed a single embedded case study design to examine the relationship between hall directors' job experience and their experience within a college residential

program and how their expectations and experiences can impact their decisions about continuing in their job at an institution. This research design is meant to look at an issue at one institution to use the insight gained to better understand a question, or "puzzlement" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 178). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "in a single instrumental case study, the researcher focuses on an issue or concerns and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue" (p. 178). Stake's (1997) definition of an intrinsic case study is one focused on a particular situation or individual (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Focusing on a particular campus (one bounded case) that fits the size focused the study on smaller campuses, which have been identified by Wilson (2008) as having difficulty with retention of staff, and was intended to assist in better understanding the phenomenon being investigated.

The current study utilized semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and website content review as its multiple sources of evidence, providing the researcher with a variety of perspectives on issues and events to draw upon to create a rich description of the phenomenon in its unique setting (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003, as cited in Tomaszewski et al., 2020). A number of research tools can be utilized in qualitative research, including observations, interviews, and analysis of documents or artifacts (Lodico et al., 2006). For the current study, interviews of seven hall directors, two mid-level professionals, and one senior housing officer were conducted. The interviews of professionals with different relationships to the hall director role provided multiple perspectives of people on different levels within the organization. Individual interviews, rather than group interviews, allowed the researcher to gain individual information about a participant's feelings or perspectives on a set of experiences, allowing the participant to express their

point of view in their own words (Lodico et al., 2006). Three interview protocols with 12 questions were utilized, one for each role in the organization. Interview protocols are a short script of questions to be used as a starting point for the discussion, with the flexibility to ask additional questions based on the responses of the participant (Lodico et al., 2006). The current study employed semi-structured interviews, to allow the researcher to probe with additional questions beyond the protocol (Lodico et al., 2006).

Documents and artifacts that existed before the study can be requested by the researcher for analysis in a qualitative study (Lodico et al., 2006). Artifacts in the current study included hall director job descriptions, recruitment materials, and training or onboarding documents. Content analysis of the department website was utilized as a method in this qualitative study. Images, text, and multimedia content can be used as tools to further validate findings from interviews and other document and artifact analyses. It is important to utilize a variety of data sources in a case study, and website analysis can be useful if combined with other methods of data collection (Yin, 2018)

The research took place over the course of seven weeks between November 2023 and January 2024, while the semi-structured interviews were completed in December 2023. Follow-up conversations and member checking occurred via email and phone between December 2023 and January 2024. Document analysis was completed in November 2023, while website analysis was conducted in January 2024. The narrow period of time for interviews was suggested by the senior housing officer at the college. It allowed the researcher to schedule conversations with participants during the period after the residence halls had closed on the campus when the participants would be most available to talk uninterrupted, and it aided the researcher in speaking with one hall

director who had recently resigned and was approaching their final day of employment. This length of time also enabled the researcher to identify patterns in experiences and inquire more thoroughly, with deeper and more informed lines of follow-up inquiries. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Cisco Webex technology. Using Dedoose software, the transcriptions of each interview, document, and website were saved and coded based on prominent themes.

According to Stake (1995), the case study can provide the researcher with particularizing data, not "generalizable" data (p. 8). While the findings are not generalizable across the field of higher education, the study's findings can build upon the existing body of research on the job experience and retention of hall directors, specifically at small, private liberal arts colleges. This chapter continues with a more detailed discussion of these methods, including the research questions, setting, participants, data collection procedures, trustworthiness, research ethics, data analysis approach, and the role of the researcher.

Research Questions

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of early-career housing professionals at a small, private liberal arts college and how they make sense of their role in the organization by examining their expectations coming into the position, mentoring relationships, and the alignment of expectations with the realities of their position. The study received a written endorsement (Appendix H) by ACUHO-I and is considered to be valuable research to its constituents. This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals at small to mid-size colleges?
2. How do leaders within housing and residence life departments make sense of the organization?
3. How do managers or mentors of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals make sense of the organization?
4. How do the realities of the hall director position align with the expectations of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals?
5. What factors are most important for early-career and new housing and residence life professionals as they make sense of their role?

Setting

The researcher selected a private liberal arts university in the mid-Atlantic United States that is a member of the ACUHO-I for this study. Selecting an institution that is an ACUHO-I member was important, as it helped the researcher to determine a pool of institutions that have residence life/housing programs that serve residential students. The university in this study was founded on the principles of an academic community that encourages freedom of thought and conscience. The university is characterized by excellence in teaching and scholarly achievement, with a challenging undergraduate curriculum in liberal arts and sciences and quality graduate and professional programs of study. Its mission includes integrated learning across disciplines, helping students to be informed, global citizens with respect for human differences. The institution offers 70 majors and a small student to faculty ratio of 11:1. At the time of the study, the student enrollment was 14,400+, with 6,400+ undergraduate and 800+ graduate students. The

retention rate was 90% and graduation rate was 78%. The campus is primarily residential and situated in a rural area characterized by a low cost of living, with 69% of students living in university housing organized into neighborhoods. The university indicated that 59% of students identify as female and 41% as male. It is a predominantly White institution (79%), with 17.7% students indicating they are African American/Black, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Alaska Native, or Mixed race.

The student body participates in a number of signature experiences, such as leadership (54%) and undergraduate research (23%), with the highest percentages of students completing internships (87%), participating in study abroad (66%), and completing service (87%). The university offers over 250 student organizations, including student government, athletic teams, intramural sports, religious and spiritual groups, and academic and special interest organizations.

The university's residential campus is organized into eight neighborhoods made up of a cluster of residence halls or apartments and common spaces. Each neighborhood provides a unique experience centered on student and faculty interaction and a common set of themes, governed by a community association made up of student, faculty, and staff representation from across the university. The residence life area puts forth community, mutual respect, service to every student, and staff development as its core values, believing that a strong residential experience connects students to an impactful academic and co-curricular environment. The residence life program is managed by a professional staffing model of one assistant dean of campus life/director, three associate directors, seven community directors, one assistant director, and seven program assistants. The residential campus experience is focused on living, learning, and personal

development through an integrated experience that brings together the academic, social, and residential areas of college life. The program is supported by over 100 student leadership and student worker positions across a variety of functions, including graduate assistant/apprenticeships, senior house managers, house managers, senior resident assistants, resident assistants (RAs), and apartment managers.

At the time of the study, the department was led by an assistant dean and director of residence life in her second year at the college, with over 13 years of experience in the field. Upon her arrival, the department had been experiencing staff turnover, with multiple vacancies compounded by a series of late-season hires to fill positions. These late-season hires did not meet minimum qualifications upon hire. They struggled to meet expectations in the job and were later not retained to their positions. The department experienced the loss of five of seven community directors in 1 year, among an entry-level team with 2 or fewer years of experience. In addition, the managers of the hall directors, the associate director team of three, all departed the college in the previous 2 years, resulting in an entirely new leadership team. Having experienced burnout from the demands during the COVID pandemic, the overall turnover of the residence life staff occurred outside of the predictable and traditional departure/hiring timeframe.

Participants

The current study examined the job experiences of hall directors through interviews with six early-career housing professionals, two mid-level HRL professionals, and one senior-level HRL officer from a single small, private institution. Early-career housing professionals are university employees with bachelor's- or master's-level education and between 0 and 3 years of experience in student housing programs, and who

live and work in a campus residence hall or complex. Mid-level HRL professionals have 3 or more years of experience in student housing programs and act in a supervisory role with the early-career housing professionals. Senior HRL officers are the department-head of the housing program on a given campus and have 7 or more years professional experience in student housing programs.

Purposive sampling was utilized to identify an institution with the characteristics of being a small and private university, with a housing program of 3,000 to 5,000 student beds; a staffing model with at least one senior housing officer, two mid-level managers, and six hall directors; and membership in ACUHO-I. Purposive sampling is utilized when the researcher uses their own judgement criteria to identify study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With the research being endorsed by ACUHO-I, the professional organization sent a recruitment email to its membership on behalf of the researcher that fit these characteristics to identify interested participants. Interested participants were directed to an online Formstack link to sample the interested person's name, role, institution, contact information, bed total, and staffing breakdown. The researcher reviewed Formstack submissions and used their best judgement to determine which institutions met the criteria. Seven interested participants submitted the Formstack link, and one institution met all of the characteristics desired for the study and was selected.

Upon selection of the institution for the current study, the researcher conducted a brief phone call with the assistant dean of campus life and director of residence life to discuss its purpose and methods and to establish a procedure to invite participants from the institution to the interviews. The researcher obtained a roster of employees with

names, titles, and email addresses of three associate directors and seven community directors, in addition to the assistant dean/director, as shown in Table 2. Recruitment emails were sent to each employee with an invitation to participate, along with a copy of the consent form. Of the 11 personnel contacted, 10 indicated interest in participating in the study and 10 scheduled interviews with the researcher.

Interviews were conducted with participants over the course of 10 days during an agreed upon time in the semester when employees would have time in their schedules. The semi-structured interviews took place over 45 minutes via Cisco Webex and were recorded. Later, the recordings were transcribed. Quota selection was not utilized, since the sample size was not large enough to form a series of subgroups, such as gender and race (Miles et al., 2014). Within the participant group, as described in Table 1, were all female participants, 9 of 10 who were master's degree credentialed. The sample was racially diverse, with 50% reporting being White or Caucasian and 50% reporting being Black or African American. Years of experience fell within expected ranges, with the exception of one community director who self-reported they had 5 years of professional experience, while the others indicated 3 or fewer, as shown in Table 3. The entire participant group selected were female, which will be factored into the findings.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Experience

Participant	Gender	Race	Title	Highest Degree Attained	Years in Current Position	Years of Professional Experience
Elena	Female	Caucasian	Assistant Dean/Director	Master's	2 years	13–14 years
Alison	Female	Black, Hispanic	Associate Director	Master's	1.5 years	10 years
Jesse	Female	Caucasian	Associate Director	Master's	6 months	21 years
Erica	Female	White	Community Director	Bachelor's	6 months	1.5 years
Peggy	Female	Black	Community Director	Master's	3 months	3 years
Roselle	Female	White	Community Director	Master's	1.5 years	1.5 years
Irene	Female	Black	Community Director	Master's	6 months	2 years
Julie	Female	Black, African American	Community Director	Master's	6 months	1.5 years
Lillian	Female	Caucasian	Community Director	Master's	2.5 years	2.5 years
Emma	Female	African American	Community Director	Master's	3 years	5 years

Table 2

Participants by Level of Role

Level of Role	Total
Senior-level	1
Mid-level	2
Early career	7

Table 3

Participants' Experience by Position Type

Experience Level (Years)	Hall Directors (Total)	Mid-Level Supervisors (Total)	Senior Housing Officers (Total)
0 to 3	9	0	0
4 to 7	1	0	0
8 to 11	0	1	0
11+	0	1	1

Participant Profiles

The 10 participants in the current study were interviewed over the course of 10 days using interview protocols specific to their role in the department. In the following section, the participants will be introduced since the interview dialogue was the major contributor to the findings. The following participants participated in this study.

Elena. Elena is the senior-level housing officer at the college, also serving as assistant dean. She has over 13 years of professional experience in higher education, post-master's. Having recently taken on this role in the last 2 years, Elena relocated to the East Coast from her previous institution on the West Coast. Elena currently supervises 5 professional staff, after one recently left the college, and one was recently promoted and moved under one of her direct reports. Elena has experienced differences in staff recruitment between her last two institutions, which are situated in states with very different minimum wage requirements.

Alison. Alison is a mid-level administrator, responsible for leadership and staff development in residence life, with 10 years of professional experience prior to joining the college. Previously, she had served in a teaching role at a high school and decided to

re-enroll in college to become the first in her family to obtain a master's degree in higher education administration and pursue a career in higher education. Alison has spent the last 18 months at the college, currently supervising hall directors in three areas, including those with first- and second-year students. Alison feels a certain kinship with the traits of first-generation college students even though she is not one, since she shared some of those experiences herself as a student and RA and feels she, too, had mentors that helped her in her educational experience.

Jesse. Jesse is a mid-level administrator, who started employment at the college in the past 6 months, but has spent 21 years in higher education. She is responsible for residential education and community development and for supervision of two hall director-level professionals in three residential areas of the campus. Jesse is a self-described "reslifer," and "ultimate nerd" about college life, having had an extremely fulfilling and involved experience as a student. She decided to enter the field when she learned that she could be a RA as a career and spend her life at a university.

Erica. Erica is a hall director-level professional at the college, with bachelor's degree. Following a 10-month stint at another liberal arts institution in a similar role, Erica accepted the position at the college where she has worked for the past 6 months. During her undergraduate studies, Erica served as a front desk assistant for 3 years, which exposed her to the connectedness of the residential staff and gave her experience in conflict resolution. This experience sparked her interest in exploring employment opportunities in residence life.

Peggy. Peggy serves in a hall director-level position at the college. She earned her master's degree in 2020 and has been working in the field of HRL for the past 3 years,

but joined the team at this college 3 months ago. After graduating during the pandemic, Peggy had some uncertainty as to how she would enter the workforce but accepted a job in HRL through a connection she had, and she recently shifted to a similar role at the college in this study. Residence life was appealing to Peggy, since she was an RA in college and understands what it takes to be a professional in the field.

Roselle. Roselle is a female in a community director position at the college. She earned her master's degree in student affairs administration from Appalachian State University, and has been in this role for 18 months, since completing her program. Roselle was an RA as an undergraduate student, and she was planning to student teach and become a teacher following graduation. A mentor of hers convinced her to return to the RA position for a second year. After taking a few classes toward her master's in an accelerated reading program, she faced "a quarter-life crisis," and questioned her reasons for attending graduate school. It was then she realized her passion was to work in residence life as a hall director, and she shifted her program and took a residence life assistantship. Thereafter, Roselle began her professional job search and landed her current position at the college.

Irene. Irene, originally from Texas, is in her first year serving as a hall director at the college. After completing her undergraduate degree, Irene took a gap year working with autistic children as they transitioned from high school to college. Later, earning a master's degree in biomedical sciences, Irene worked as an elementary school teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. That experience showed her that teaching was not her passion, and neither would be medical school. Irene realized that she enjoyed her time as an undergraduate RA, deciding the opportunity to serve in a hall director-type role at a

college was a better fit. Irene has a passion for working with college-aged students and living where she works. She has been in this role for the past 6 months.

Julie. Julie is in her first year as a hall director at the college, having joined the team 6 months prior. Having earned a master's degree in higher education administration from a state institution, Julie embarked on her career in higher education first in a student activities role, but the weekend work, planning, budget management, and demands of a variety of stakeholders felt overwhelming. The hall director role at this college offered her an opportunity to still be front-facing and work with students to develop leaders, with some programming responsibilities, and create a more stable financial arrangement living on her own since the housing and benefits were attractive to her. Julie's experience in her graduate assistantship in this functional area led her to believe this position aligned with her interests.

Lillian. Lillian has been in the hall director level role for the past 2 years and 6 months, after completing her graduate studies in educational leadership. She self-described her entry into a residence life career as non-traditional, since she never served as an RA or graduate assistant in the functional area. Lillian stated that she was not focused on or interested in working in residence life, but rather focused on finding a job in academic advising. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, job opportunities were limited, and while she applied mostly for advising positions, she did apply for a few residence life positions to keep her options open. The job opportunity at this college in residence life came about in late July, and she took it. Lillian's decision to accept mostly rested on the opportunities to work with faculty and to teach a first-year seminar.

Emma. Emma spent the last 3 years serving in a hall director-level position at the college, having spent 2 years prior working in a student success and mentoring-centered role elsewhere. Emma earned her master's degree in English and African American literature from a state institution. She became interested in working in HRL after a recommendation from a person she considers a mentor, who advised her that residence life is a good entry-level position because it provides opportunities for responsibilities in a variety of functional areas, which prepares an individual for advancement in the field. Also, the position was financially appealing, since it would allow her to live on her own.

Data Collection Procedures

The current study employed three data collection strategies to examine the job experience of early-career residence life professionals and the perceptions of their managers and senior leader. The researcher conducted semi-structured individual interviews with the hall directors, mid-level managers who supervise the hall directors, and the senior HRL officer. The researcher conducted a document analysis using the hall director job description, training materials, and materials used in the recruitment process. Lastly, the researcher conducted a content analysis of the department's website to review the online communication strategies used to articulate the role and job experience of the community director at the college to compare and contrast with other data sources collected.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted for approximately 45 minutes with each subject. Brinkmann et al. (2015) described an interview as an interaction between the interviewer and subject that results in learning new information (as cited in

Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were conducted remotely through Cisco Webex audio conference and were recorded using Webex technology. The researcher obtained advance consent from each participant to being recorded. Interviews were conducted from home as a neutral location, providing the interviewees with an informal, disturbance-free setting to increase their level of comfort. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that preparing for an interview should involve locating "a physical setting where a private conversation can be held that lends itself to audio taping" (p. 181).

The seven stages of interview inquiry described by Brinkmann et al. (2015) and the responsive interviewing model of Rubin et al. (2012) were utilized to establish a flexible interview protocol, to allow for the different experiences of each participant to be sampled (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). The protocols were flexible to allow the researcher to change the interviewing sequence so that the conversation could be meaningful and natural, alter the questions asked, and adjust the locations in which the interviews took place (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, for the chief housing officer protocol (Appendix D), the first three questions allowed the researcher to learn about their professional background, Questions 4 to 9 related to perceptions about the department culture and experience retaining staff, and Questions 10 to 13 were about perceptions of how professionals make sense of their work environment. For the mid-level manager protocol (Appendix C), the first two questions allowed the researcher to learn about their professional background, Questions 3 to 6 addressed the recruitment of new professionals and the desired qualifications and preparation the manager was expecting, and Questions 7 to 12 pertained to how the manager perceived the organizational culture and sensemaking process. For the early-career professional

protocol (Appendix B), Questions 1 to 4 explored the person's background, preparation, and expectations for their current role; Questions 5 to 10 examined the job experience of the hall director, and Questions 11 to 13 were about sensemaking and their decision to continue in this line of work. The researcher developed a crosswalk table (Appendix F) to link the interview questions with the literature review, research question, and possible themes.

Document Analysis

According to Bowen (2009), "document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic" (p. 321). In deciding to use document analysis for this study, the researcher was able to examine a concrete set of expectations for hall directors to compare and contrast with the interviews. The documents selected are the written job description the university uses when recruiting new hall directors, training and onboarding materials, and recruitment marketing materials. In addition to the interviews with hall directors, managers, and senior residence life officers, the document analysis allowed for triangulation of information to help validate that the findings are consistent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By analyzing recruitment and job description documents, as well as conducting interviews with subjects at different levels within the organization, the researcher was able ascertain if expectations are uniform or contradictory. The researcher developed a crosswalk table (Appendix E) for the document analysis, linking possible document types with the themes, evidence, and research questions.

Website Content Analysis

A content analysis of the department's website was conducted to find recurrent themes as they relate to the job experience of hall directors. The analysis provided useful insights into the narratives that are embedded in the department website, looking at the textual elements, visual storytelling components, and interactive features. Coding and categorization are important parts of the qualitative data analysis process (Miles et al., 2014). Website content analysis involves systematically coding and categorizing textual or visual data to identify patterns. The website analysis triangulated the data collected from documents and interviews to tell the whole story. The researcher reviewed the mission and values section of the department website, including the overview brochure, and a recruitment landing page geared toward attracting talent to the division at the college.

Trustworthiness

There are several ways the trustworthiness of the data was maintained in this study. The researcher checked for researcher effects on the case and the case on the researcher, triangulated the data, and weighted the evidence. According to Miles et al. (2014), researchers can unintentionally create social behavior in participants that is not natural or may not have ordinarily occurred. To avoid potential personal effects on the case, and vice versa, on the data collected, the researcher made intentions clear for participants, explaining why the researcher was interviewing them, how the information would be collected, and the safeguards the researcher used to keep their data safe and confidential. In addition, the interviews were conducted in a neutral environment, from

the private office of the researcher and home of the participants, via Cisco Webex audio call to reduce the threat quotient.

Triangulation can support a finding by explaining that a minimum of three separate measures are in agreement, or do not provide evidence that is contrary to it (Miles et al., 2014). Triangulation can be by method, data type, researcher, and theory (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher shared data and codes with colleagues on his own campus, inquiring for their viewpoints and feedback. The researcher triangulated the data by relying on interviews from managers and hall directors, and through a document review of hall director recruitment and evaluative materials to obtain three unique perspectives. The methods the researcher used in this study were used not only to confirm findings but also to highlight the contradictions, particularly between hall director and the other residence life professionals.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that representativeness of data demonstrates the suitability and thoroughness of the data gathered pointing toward a "thick description that illuminates the complexity and uniqueness of the phenomena we study" (p. 300). To check for the representativeness of data, the researcher weighted the evidence to determine its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The early-career hall directors in this case could provide better data about their day-to-day work experiences and their perceptions about the field prior to being hired, while their managers may be more knowledgeable about expectations, recruitment and training procedures, job performance, and trends. Job descriptions, interview questions, performance evaluations, and recruitment materials could confirm that manager expectations and job responsibilities are in line with communicated expectations

and job experience. The frequency of topics discussed by interviewees will confirm points of view as accurately reflecting the job experience of the subjects (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Ethics

Ethical issues in qualitative research can arise during all parts of the research process: prior to the study; at the beginning of the study; while collecting data; and while analyzing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Protection of the research site and participating subjects guided the researcher's practice throughout the study. Subjects were asked to participate voluntarily, and subjects were given the opportunity to opt out at any time.

To obtain consent, the researcher utilized an informed consent (Appendix A) that was emailed to all participants for signature prior to interviews. The consent form was in PDF and outlined the nature of the study, that the study would be completed via Cisco Webex and recorded, the means by which the researcher would keep names and identifying information confidential, and how the data would be maintained and destroyed. Participants were asked to print the consent form and provide their signature, and return the document to the researcher via email before the interview.

The interviews were conducted in the researcher's private workplace office after business hours, designed to minimize possible interruptions. After the data were collected, they were uploaded and secured via a password protected web-based program, Dedoose. The Dedoose software, through an individual user account allows researchers to collect, compile, code, and analyze data from multiple media and formats. In the current study, interview transcripts, job descriptions, performance evaluations,

recruitment materials were collected and uploaded. The software contains two-step authentication, allowing for security at the highest level.

Data Analysis Approach

The research questions for the current study required a deep understanding of the experience of early-career housing professionals and were best answered through qualitative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research seeks to better understand the lives of people through a thoughtful and thorough process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The case study should also incorporate multiple sources that can explore the complexity of the problem at hand (Yin, 2017). The current study collected and analyzed data obtained through multiple sources—interviews, documents, and website content—and organized it into categories and themes that emerged, using the comparative method of analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For the current research, the researcher chose case study methodology that was connected to the purpose of the study. A case study examines the specifics and intricacies of a case to understand its unique activities and situations (Stake, 1995). The case should be bounded, meaning the case should be clearly characterized with fixed limits (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As such, the study narrowed its focus to participants who fit the characteristics of small to mid-size, private liberal arts institutions as identified through the ACUHO-I membership database. Case studies can be used to evaluate or as an external assessment, but in education they can be utilized to help other practitioners in revieing or forming their own practice (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The current study will provide senior housing officers at small to midsize, private liberal arts colleges with considerations for their campus programs as they recruit, hire, train, and retain personnel.

Interviews

A critical source of data in case study research is interviews, since the depth of analysis of interview data can greatly influence the overall findings of a case study (Stake, 1995). Therefore, the meticulous and detailed analysis of interview data can help the researcher achieve a better understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the participants in a case study (Stake, 1995). In the current study, the researcher collected and reviewed video recordings and transcripts during interviews to collect data and fill emerging gaps (Miles et al., 2014). To ensure that the researcher was attentive to participants and providing verbal and nonverbal feedback during the interview process, interviews were recorded and transcribed using Cisco Webex, utilizing the secure campus network at the university. Transcripts were transcribed in Microsoft Word and saved in a Microsoft OneDrive file with dual authentication and reviewed numerous times for accuracy and editing. Attention was paid and notes taken to account for body language and other non-verbal cues. According to Miles et al., one of the ways in which accuracy of transcription of interviews can be attained is through member checking. To confirm accuracy from recording to transcription, the interview transcriptions were checked with the participants themselves. Upon completion of this member checking step, the transcriptions were uploaded into Dedoose for each participant. Dedoose is a software that organizes research documents and artifacts by storing them and assisting in the analysis and codification process. Finally, the researcher continued reviewing the codes and adjusted them for purposeful collection of data. Using themes from the literature review, the researcher developed a start list of codes, represented by brief excerpts that assigned meaningful attributes for particular sections of the data (Miles et al., 2014). For

second-level coding, the emotion coding technique was utilized to label the experiences described by the participants, and similar codes were clustered together to create fewer groupings or pattern codes (Miles et al., 2014). Clustering was used to group the data into categories and to reorganize codes into new, more representative clusters (Miles et al., 2014). Using the Dedoose software, the researcher tallied code occurrence to order the codes from the highest to lowest frequency across all interviews and documents. This counting assisted in answering the research questions.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is a valuable and rich data source in case study research, but it is often used as a complementary method to other data collection approaches such as interviews and direct observations (Stake, 1995). The researcher selected document analysis to provide supplemental data to the individual interviews. A wide range of materials can be selected for document analysis, including written records, reports, memos, or other artifacts (Stake, 1995). In the current study, the researcher utilized the community director job description, onboarding and training schedules, and recruitment materials. These documents relate closely to the written scope of the community director position, the ways in which they were trained to do their work, and the strategies used to attract them to the role in the first place. According to Stake (1995), the type of documents selected should relate to the case study subject matter and be selected based on their relevancy to getting a holistic view of the case.

The researcher obtained the job description, onboarding and training schedules, and recruitment marketing materials via email from the assistant dean of campus life/director following an email request. The documents were uploaded to Dedoose

software for storage and were reviewed in the coding process. Using the start list of codes from the literature review, the documents were coded using common themes. Clustering was used to group the data into categories and to reorganize codes into new, more representative clusters (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher tallied the code occurrence to help answer the research questions.

Website Content Analysis

Utilizing multiple data sources in qualitative research enhances data analysis and can assist in the triangulation of data sources in a case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the current study, website content was analyzed in addition to interview transcripts and document analysis. The researcher reviewed the web content that was publicly accessible on the department website and the divisional recruitment landing page. The website information was saved as PDF files and uploaded to Dedoose software for storage, as well as printed in paper copy. The paper copy was marked with the start list of codes from the literature review, and the website content was coded using frequent themes. Referencing the work of Miles et al. (2014), the researcher used clustering to group data into larger categories, reassembling the codes into more descriptive clusters. Code frequency was totaled to assist in responding to the research questions posed.

Role of Researcher

As an indigenous outsider in this qualitative study, it is important to discuss how my experiences and values relate to my research question and the group I used in this case study. According to Banks (1998), an indigenous outsider was once a member of his or her indigenous community, but has now assimilated to a different culture or group and aligned his or her “values, beliefs, perspectives, and knowledge” with the outside group

and is now perceived as an "outsider" by the "indigenous" group (p. 5). Savin-Baden and Major (2013) described positionality as the "position the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" (p. 40). Positionality can be identified and developed in three major ways: (a) identifying the researcher's personal points of view that can impact the research; (b) considering how they viewed by themselves and regarded by the study participants; and (c) determining the researcher's context and procedures of the study (Holmes, 2020).

In terms of personal points of view, in my career working with HRL programs at private institutions, I have experienced first-hand the challenges in the recruitment and retention of early-career professionals. In recent years, I have witnessed challenges with the commitment term of hall directors and a level of disconnect between our expectations and their performance in the position. As a senior leader in student affairs, I have experienced the strain vacant positions put on the greater team, and how it impacts morale when one employee has to take on additional responsibilities. Constant cycles of recruiting, hiring, and onboarding staff create information gaps, in addition to the productivity challenges that come with shifting work. I have seen a shift in the hiring cycle from seasonal to all seasons, and a greater willingness for institutions to poach staff from other institutions in the middle of the academic year, which previously was taboo.

I was particularly interested in doing this research to answer questions to better inform practice. While the study participants may not have known me before the study, my role in higher education may have caused participants to think I am not aware of or am disconnected from the realities of their day-to-day jobs. Inherent differences that come with age and experience have made the appearance that those same values are in

conflict. I am middle aged, White, male, and from a middle-class background. I am a homeowner, a married father of three, with over 20 years of experience that now separates me in terms of years from the lived experience of a residence life professional. In this stage of my career, I find myself more often in a position of writing a job description than aspiring to one, though I would argue those lessons learned early in my career shape my point of view still to this day. It is important for researchers to consider how values and viewpoints are not static, and can evolve over time (Rowe, 2014). I used a reflexive approach and recognized that my positionality in this study was never predetermined, but rather linked to its context (Holmes, 2020). Finlay (1998) asserted that reflexivity is the inspection of one's own principles, conclusions, and actions, and how these may have influenced what we do during the research process. To mitigate my own bias, I made my intentions clear as I recruited participants in the case study, and in the consent form each participant signed. I sought to ask follow-up questions in the interviews to seek authenticity and clarity of the experience of the subjects, and I used open-ended questioning in the interview protocol.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a summary of the case study methodology used to collect data through semi-structured interviews and analysis of documents obtained from participants in this qualitative study. The participants selected included early-career HRL professionals, mid-level managers, and a chief housing officer in a bounded case study at a small to mid-size private college, with 3,000 to 5,000 student beds in their dormitories. The research questions sought to explore the preparatory, recruitment, onboarding, and job experiences of hall directors, addressing a pressing need in the field to better

understand how to better retain personnel in the field of student affairs. This chapter also includes information about the researcher's role as an indigenous outsider and how potential bias was mitigated in the analysis. This endorsed research study will provide valuable insight in addressing the aftermath of the "great resignation" in higher education (Lederman, 2021).

CHAPTER 4

This case study examined the job experience of early-career hall directors working in housing at a small, private university as it relates to retention to their position and the field. The setting for this study was a private, 4-year university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The qualitative approach of the researcher involved individual semi-structured interviews over the course of two weeks of 10 participants in the study who represent three distinct roles in the residence life program at the college: one senior-level professional; two mid-level professionals with supervision responsibility; and seven early-career professionals. In addition, the researcher reviewed documents received from the senior-level housing professional, including the onboarding schedule for new community directors, online recruitment and marketing pieces, and a staff position description for the community director. Lastly, a website content analysis was completed to review the publicly accessible department homepage and divisional recruitment website. This chapter will review the findings from the data collected in the participants' voices, to convey their experiences in their own words and how they made sense of their job, department, and institution. The data uncovered four themes, which revealed the job experience of early-career hall directors at a small, private university is characterized by: (a) ambiguity and overloaded responsibilities; (b) struggles with work-life balance; and (c) workplace shortfalls that compound their autonomy. As they make sense of their roles, hall directors seem to thrive in a (d) scaffolded environment equipped with strong graduate preparation, job-ready skills, effective onboarding, and mentorship.

Theme 1: Ambiguity Overload

The central theme of ambiguity overload arises from the findings. Ambiguity overload (coded as "generalist, role ambiguity") describes the nature of the hall director position as being broad and encompassing a number of different functions across a wide range of areas and skill sets. This theme describes how the types of responsibilities and freedoms are critical to understanding the experience of the hall director at a university.

The hall director position is difficult to describe to someone who does not work directly in that line of work. The campus life division at the college has a website designed to help recruit candidates for hire by highlighting the ancillary benefits and experiences. The site begins with a tagline that sets an expectation that by joining the team the employee will join a distinguished community. It described the community as, "an opportunity to work with one of America's best and most innovative universities." The website continues to describe that employees can expect a certain level of support at the college: "You'll work alongside dedicated, caring and supportive colleagues who are invested in the success of each other and our campus and local communities." The recruitment website includes a link to current vacant positions for review. The community director position, the hall director-type role at the college, is listed as a current vacancy. The website contains a link to an electronic version of the position summary document, which is identical, at the college. The document identifies the main responsibilities and duties for the community director, including facilities management, supervisory, programmatic, conduct and other areas. In addition to "responsibilities [including] overseeing the management of a residential neighborhood," the position

summary asserts duties that include dining with students and regular student contact and mentorship. The position summary specifies:

> Supervising a Program Assistant (administrative assistant), graduate apprentice, and residential student staff; maintaining daily student contact through shared meals, mentoring, facilitating programs and initiatives, and developing student leadership opportunities; co-chairing the neighborhood association with a live-in faculty member; collaborating with staff and faculty members in living learning communities; developing community programs; serving as a student conduct hearing officer; serving as a student care and outreach responder, including in an `on-call capacity, and serving in leadership capacities for departmental efforts.

The variety of functional areas depicted in the position description acknowledge the breadth of responsibilities to the position, making it an expansive and unspecialized role at the college. At the same time, the position listing indicates the level of experience required is minimal, with "1–2 years of post bachelor's experience," or: "Completed master's degree in higher education, student personnel, or related field and 1–2 years of experience (including graduate assistantship/apprenticeships) in Residence Life or a related functional area of higher education strongly preferred." This lower level of experience requirement of the community director position also comes with an expectation that enhanced learning and professional development may be necessary. The recruitment website highlights a number of professional development opportunities, but specifically a 10-class "ESP" program, denoting, "Enhanced Supervision Program" for new employees to the division of campus life. The website describes the goals of the program: "During the [college] strategic planning process, staff and faculty articulated

the critical importance of supervisory learning and development in building a dynamic working environment where all employees can thrive through new learning pathways and enhanced supervisory training." The website continues to articulate learning outcomes for the ESP program that include "communication;" "learning capacity and initiative;" "self-awareness and relationships;" "organizational acumen;" "employee development;" "technical knowledge;" and "global perspective: diversity, equity and inclusion."

Advancing from the recruitment website to the training process documentation, the researcher examined the onboarding schedule document "Community Director Onboarding Schedule" dated June 5, 2023. It includes a short list of subjects identified as "topics that will come later in training," listed approximately one week into the training schedule. The list illustrates a wide variety of functional and topical areas that will be explored in greater detail, but that relate to the work of the community directors. They include:

> Student care and concern; student conduct; campus policy; title IX; Counseling services; GLC support and advocacy; Inclusive excellence; bias education and response; orientation and new student programs; campus recreation and wellness; budgets and fiscal responsibility; risk management; the college's Strategic Plan; SNA/NRHH info; On-call Training.

Clearly, the onboarding schedule conveys that community directors are expected to collaborate with an abundance of constituents and are accountable to a variety of stakeholders, with the incumbents being less experienced, more entry-level personnel. Lillian is a third-year community director at the college, a position she was hired into as her first job out of graduate school. Like many of the participants in the current study,

Lillian reflected on her numerous responsibilities beyond just supervising a building and student staff:

> That can be a lot on top of just supervising, and they have concerns . . . and then programming on top of that. So it's just a lot of buckets and hats that we wear and just trying to manage all of that while doing a good job, um, can be very overwhelming at different points of the school year.

With a little less experience than Lillian, 25-year-old Roselle is one year removed from her master's program and in her second year as a community director at the college. She built upon Lillian's assessment, highlighting the ambiguity that exists in the role. She described a typical day in her job at the college as "challenging, on a simplistic level." She explained:

> It's so hard to explain to people what I do, just because there's so many things like, that I do and you just, you never know what that's going to be. So, I think the, uh, responsibility whiplash as I sometimes refer to, it can be really hard. Like, in a day I can go from having a care meeting with a student where they're sharing some really hard information about something they're going through and then the next minute, I'm talking about budgets, and then the next meeting with catering to plan food for a party, the next minute my RA is coming in the office crying and that's all in the morning. And, so that aspect is really challenging. The emotional investment and just kind of never knowing what is walking in on a day-to-day basis.

The "responsibility whiplash" Lillian describes is compounded by the unknown. Who they serve and how they go about it can be different any day. The hall director

participants overwhelmingly agreed, however, that their contributions are vital to the campus' operation. Lillian continued: "Without people in my position, like, the university absolutely could not run, um, because we are such a residential-driven . . . mentorship-driven campus college experience. Like, it wouldn't, it couldn't run without someone in my position."

This cross-functional expectation of the community director position is evident in the process by which candidates are interviewed for hire. Alison, a mid-level manager that supervises the community directors, shared the cross-campus input in the interview process:

> When we do on campus interviews, we structure them by sort of like, titles. So, we have interviews that are for the program distance, so we know that those are the groups the community directors are going to be supervising, right? We do one with other communities . . . of course all neighborhoods are different, but ideally we have our first-year neighborhoods, mixed-class neighborhoods, and we have apartments. And then we have campus partners, those can include other offices they're going to collaborate with.

With such a variety of stakeholders, community directors, once hired, seek guidance and support in their role from their supervisors as well as the other areas they work with closely. Alison, a manager of the community directors with 10 years of post-graduate experience, described how the personnel who report to her navigate finding answers to questions in their day-to-day role: "It's a nuanced situation." She continued by sharing that supervisors do not always advise their team directly in their variety of functions:

> We might not necessarily have the direct answer. They might still ask us first as supervisors, but the consensus might then just be to give a call to the conduct office, or something like that to hear from them directly on how they would like the situation handled. And ultimately, that's kind of how they go about that and even in those cases, they're meeting biweekly all together with the conduct office. They're meeting about biweekly also with their, um, care outreach liaison, so there are dedicated times when they have to follow up with their director, supervisor, or a campus partner that they're working with really closely.

Managing the variety of responsibilities is a challenge for the community directors. Peggy, an experienced 27-year-old community director, in her third month on the job at the college, described some of her daily struggles managing the needs of a demanding student population and the high expectations of the campus community in a position whose responsibilities can seem ambiguous:

> Lots of meetings, and we get a lot of emails. So, just taking time out of my day to stop and try to understand. OK. Who are these people? What are their roles? How can I connect with them? And, like, what is the general purpose of our office existing?

Erica worked in a similar position for 10 months prior to starting at the college, where she is in her second year as a community director. Erica's point of view supports that of Peggy, as she acknowledged, "I have a good idea how my day's going to start," but tempered that clarity with an opposing take: "I never night know how it's going to end. So, knowing kind of how to best rearrange my to do list or my priority list can be a challenge sometimes, but I think a good challenge." Irene, a 27-year-old community

director with a master's degree in medical sciences, also underscored the ambiguity of her role. She started by stating she typically describes her job as managing a neighborhood of 400 first-year students, and she does "Everything from, honestly, I just manage their concerns, like, and I don't know how to further describe it without getting very technical. We really, like, in my role specifically, and higher ed, like, we really do it all."

Elena is a 37-year-old senior housing officer. She described the ambiguity of the community director role since they are expected to hire, train, and staff their offices, be staffed to answer phones, and serve in a managerial capacity early in their career. On top of that, Elena added:

> They take up care cases, they are student conduct hearing officers. They work with facilities management, on billing reconciliation. So, they are something to so many people that I think sometimes our associate directors don't really truly know what the community directors' day to day looks like.

To better understand the community director's work experience and the demands they are faced with, Elena shared her team has built a set of guidelines: "We now have percentages associated with each bucket of responsibility, and that's been a really good process for us to quantify. Kind of . . . how much time should you be spending on something."

The hall director position serving a variety of functions with ambiguous and broad responsibilities is consistent with the accounts from community directors, their managers, and the written responsibilities. The duties of this type of position are vast and cross functional, and a variety of campus stakeholders rely on the personnel performing them

in a timely fashion. At the same time, the entry-level personnel tasked with these responsibilities articulated how their jobs can be overwhelming and difficult to explain. When seeking guidance and support, the community directors find the systems in place to be complicated to navigate to obtain answers to questions, since they are not always linear to a direct supervisor.

Theme 2: Work-Life Balance

The relationship between the professional and personal life, or work-life balance, of the hall director role is often characterized by a job experience that is intense in work and brief tenure. The theme work-life balance (coded as "Work-Life Balance") describes the intersecting and overlapping relationship of the employee's work and home environments. The current case study saw the emergence of one subtheme, job retention challenges (coded as "retention challenges"). The job experience of the hall director, including the work-life experience of these employees, contributes to employees seeking to end employment shortly after beginning work or deciding to change careers shortly thereafter.

The live-in role of hall directors provides some financial relief for early-career housing professionals, giving them the ability to afford to live on their own in housing that is included at no charge as part of their employment package. This benefit also comes at a cost; since hall directors live where they work, their ability to separate their work and home life can be challenging. In the current case study, the community directors expressed that the work-life balance is something they struggle with, and their managers seek to support them. This issue, as described by certain participants, is not specific to this college.

Peggy talked about how it seems other personnel at the college do not always acknowledge how easy it is to demand more of their time because the community directors live on campus. Peggy shared,

> Me being aware of how much I exert myself in this role and being aware of how much it wears on me, because it's a lot to live at work and to have other people feel like your time doesn't really matter. They think because you're always here, so you should be the first to handle things, not realizing how much that takes a toll on us.

Peggy went on to acknowledge that the housing component of her job is financially beneficial, but it also comes with some personal sacrifices. Peggy asserted, "I love free rent, but I also don't love living on campus all the time." She described how she doesn't really get private time, even after the workday:

> Um, even though this situation is better than my last institution, it's still, it would be ideal to, you know, choose where I live and go to and from work. Versus, you know, it's lovely to take a 3-minute walk from my apartment door to my office door and the convenience that comes with that but . . . I would pay rent for my peace.

Julie has had a similar experience to Peggy's. Interruptions, including when she is walking on campus and in the middle of the night, have made balance a front-and-center issue. She explained:

> I would like to truly create a separation of work and life when I get off work at 5 o'clock some days, not every day, and then I walk home. But, when I have to come back outside to go to the grocery store, take my trash out, I'm running into

> students again, or I'm running into my student staff. They want to stop and talk and ask me something really quick and it's like, I'm off the clock, but I'm still in my working space. Or even, like, living in the residence hall, there's fire alarms and so I may have a fire alarm at 2 a.m. but then I still got to wake up and go back in the office.

Roselle felt that her personal goals of having a life outside of the workplace are infringed by the demands of the position. As she is seeking to have a family someday, her thoughts are that this job will interfere with her priorities. She discussed,

> The thought of, you know, our staff meetings are on Wednesday nights. I can never, ever do anything with my family on Wednesday nights. Like, Wednesday nights are, just, they don't exist for me right now. Um, I don't want to have to miss games and student teacher conferences and play rehearsals and all of those things. Those are important to me.

The supervisors of the community directors do identify that work-life balance is an area of concern, but one that the college is taking steps to address. "I think there is a huge focus on work-life balance," Jesse said. Jesse shared that flexibility and compensating for extra time are strategies she is utilizing. Jesse continued,

> Rightfully so, and most needed, but I think that that's changed the way that we approach those with whom we supervise. We don't just say, "Get it done." We say, "Oh, we're going to need this, but, you know, if you're going to need to work an extra half hour on it now and make sure you take off that extra half hour at other times."

Alison discussed how she identifies with the experience of the community directors and being visible on and off the clock. She described their roles as, "challenging and stressful in that you feel like you're in a fishbowl, right?" The fishbowl analogy is a common one used to described the live-in lifestyle of a hall director. Alison defined the fishbowl concept further, asserting,

> You live on campus. Students are always going to be around, whether you're actually at work or you're just in your on-campus apartment. So, they see and hear everything that you say, and that you do. So, I think that that can be very challenging in terms of self-care, and trying to separate work from home and have that work-life balance. I think that that could be really challenging, but I also think it's rewarding.

At the department level, Elena sees how the housing and meal component of the community director role is seen as extra compensation, which has been an obstacle to increasing compensation in this role. Elena pointed out that "residence life has been thought of as an after-thought when it comes to compensation." Elena argued that this phenomenon is not necessarily unique to the college, but an issue in the field. She continued,

> Because of the housing and meals that are sometimes and typically associated with the positions . . . I think institutions nationwide have got to start showing, uh, money is where the value is and that's what our staff are seeing that's what they're leaving for. I don't think it is always the stress and nighttime calls. I think that is part of it, but ultimately, it's easy to walk away if the dollar figures are not there.

Having an employee who lives on campus versus one who goes home at the end of the workday can lead to abuses by the institution of the live-in employee. This dynamic can play out when a need arises after hours or on weekends, and the live-in staff can be overutilized to serve in this capacity out of convenience, in place of than other personnel. Elena expounded:

> Live-in sacrifices that our staff makes when they fight for parking. They need to avoid that student who is, you know, upset at them for whatever conduct thing. Like, the sacrifices for living on campus should never get quantified into your paycheck. And that's a dissonance that needs, as a field, to be figured out.

The community directors and their managers acknowledge that that the demands of the position often result in an intrusion of work responsibilities into the personal lives of personnel, making the job difficult to cope with for early-career professionals. Participants shared that this challenge is not unique to the college in this study, but may be an issue in the field overall. In the current case study, there have been instances where participants revealed duties may be assigned to these personnel based on the fact they live on campus, with the assumption that the housing component of their jobs is compensation for those additional responsibilities. In some cases, the community directors have made the decision that these experiences will direct them to consider other career options, or a direction other than residence life in higher education.

Retention Challenges

Elena recalled that the challenges with filling positions were among the first things she dealt with when she joined the college a few years ago. "We came in with multiple vacancies in my first year," she shared. The staffing shortfalls have put pressure

on her as the leader to find ways to curb the retention crisis in her department. Elena has been introspective about how the institution can change to be more appealing to candidates and to retain employees. She asserted:

> It's harder to recruit and retain folks in this atmosphere . . . kind of the "What can we do to keep you?" Like, just doing everything under the sun. What professional development can we do? What job description changes? Compensation changes? The entire university just went through a compensation study.

Peggy somewhat disagreed with Elena and shared that the reasons why she perceives staff do not retain are not looked at closely enough. She described that the retention problem is identified, but the root causes are still elusive:

> I don't feel like that gets acknowledged, like, the reasons why. We always talk about the fact that it's a problem and that we want to change it, but I don't, I don't really see conversations about all of the things that lead to community directors leaving at such high rates and even when talking to.

Lillian agreed with Peggy, stating that the retention issue persists while the issues have not been completely dealt with. She stated, "I keep seeing people leaving, like a revolving door. You know, you have a problem, but the problem necessarily hasn't been addressed."

Elena explained that the impact of staff turnover stretches beyond early-career professionals and the community director position. She also clarified that COVID-19 still has an impact on the job experience: "Not only entry-level staff turning over. It has been assistant directors and program assistants." She believes it is related to the constant turnover of the hall staff and navigating through the pandemic:

> Supervisors of these positions [are] feeling burned out, right? Burned out at not only trying to retain folks through a tough pandemic where [the college] did stay open, you know, the entire time, and was doing the whole delivering pandemic meals, two rooms and doing testing on rotation. And they did all those things. They had so much.

Elena shared that just a few days prior to the interview she had another community director resign. She described that these vacancies have a residual impact. Elena continued,

> I mean, the number of contingency staffing plans that I've had to write as a director is staggering. I didn't expect that. By any means, coming into this role, having to patch things together, it feels like constantly. I just had another staff member depart on Friday from a community director role, so one more staffing plan . . . in the interim.

Other staff members are considering next professional steps. Alison, a manager with mid-level experience, is considering how transferable her experiences are to another career path. Alison shared,

> I could also see myself using the skills that I've learned in this role, and I will continue to learn in this role and to transition them to maybe if HR work or something related, close to what I currently do in the next few years.

Julie's mindset is similar to Alison's, but for different reasons. Julie asserted, "there's not enough payoff in the end." While Julie finds the work to be rewarding, the benefits she shared do not outweigh the drawbacks. Julie believes she can find some of the same impactful work elsewhere. She continued,

> It's like, I love my job. I feel like I'm doing meaningful work, but I don't feel like I'm being cared for in the ways that I deserve, and I don't feel like I'm being compensated in the ways that I deserve. And, so ultimately, it's like, no, I need to leave this field and it sounds bad, but I think I need to be in a more transactional role because I'm so relational in general. I can do that outside of work and it fills my cup.

Irene, like Julie and Alison, is also considering what is next, and the career path trajectory seems to be uncertain to her. The uncertainty has led her to consider leaving the field entirely. Irene shared,

> I'm not sure that's what I want to do for my next step. Here that is the associate director and that means either doing operations or you're doing community development, or you're doing another one, like leadership. I'm not sure what happens after 5 years. I don't know if it means I leave higher education altogether. I do often ask myself, because we have had a lot of turnover in this particular position at this [college], but I don't think it's a [this college] problem. I think it's just a higher ed problem.

The participants revealed that the retention of early-career housing professionals has been an ongoing challenge. Managers described the current hiring environment to be volatile and explained that they have had to find ways to patch together temporary staffing plans, rework job descriptions to fill vacancies, and meet the growing expectations of additional compensation for additional work that is the result of staffing shortages. The product of this challenging work environment in the current case has led employees at multiple levels to leave or consider leaving their jobs for new employment

inside and outside of higher education, as they feel the root issues have not been fully addressed.

Theme 3: Workforce Shortfalls Compound Autonomous Experience

The central theme of workforce shortfalls compound autonomous experience addresses the unique challenges of hall directors at this institution, as distinct from from their larger and public institutions, where there has been significantly more research. The current case study revealed two subthemes: recruitment challenges (coded as "recruitment challenges") and autonomy (coded as "autonomy"). The subtheme recruitment challenges reveals participants' reflections on the current employment landscape, both regionally and nationally; changes in minimum wage laws; how job responsibilities are compensated; and how the positions are marketed to potential employees. The subtheme autonomy highlights the degree of self-direction the community directors have experienced in their position in performing their job functions.

Recruitment Challenges

In the marketing flyer seeking to hire a community director for one of the neighborhoods at the college, the narrative describes what the college is seeking in their next hire: "The community director position requires an energetic, highly motivated, thoughtful, and adaptive team player with strong interpersonal and organizational skills who brings a student-centered approach to their work."

Elena has had the unique experience of recruiting candidates in two different regions. The employment and minimum compensation laws, she shared have presented her with different realities as she recruited new hires. When the state laws changed at her

previous institution, Elena saw exempt salaries increased to twice the minimum wage, which was already over $15 per hour. She remembered:

> So, our new professionals, and the way they were compensated, changed within I think my first or second year being a director out there, vaulting them from $31,000 a year to now making low fifties as a community director. I saw just through the roof interest in those positions.

To compete in the national market with variations in compensation, colleges have had to get creative to garner interest in their early-career positions. The division recruitment website featured a descriptive section on the region and surrounding neighborhood of the college to convey a sense of how living and working in this environment was a selling point in the recruitment process. The descriptions sound like advertisements for vacation destinations highlighted the natural setting, stating, “from hiking and camping to fishing and kayaking, there is something for everyone.”

Senior housing officers, including Elena, are finding the struggle to recruit in the college’s area of the country to be real. Reflecting on 3 years in the role, Elena shared that the requirements of the position were modified to increase the pool of applicants. She commented that they changed the community director job description from master’s required to master’s preferred and attributed the decision to the compensation environment in her region of employment:

> In the last couple of years, I mean, obviously there’s dramatic, uh, folks feeling differently, about their work-life relationship right now. And I think we’re very much feeling that. Cost of living in [this region] is much lower than most of the country. So, our positions don’t really shine nationwide. I do feel it has been

> pretty regional recruiting. I do feel like folks are not looking to move [here] in the same way they were looking to move [there]. And so, you know, I think compensation-wise, location-wise, folks are considering different career opportunities. We've had to move our position to being master's preferred instead of master's required.

The marketing flyer also highlights benefits to the community director position, which include paid time off and holidays, extra compensation for on-call and weekend responsibilities, and vacation time. In addition, the flyer highlights the college is welcoming to partners and pets; provides free parking and a reserved space; and offers competitive salary, retirement, and other benefits, including "professional development funding up to $1,400 a year."

In support of the marketing piece, Jesse acknowledged that professional development opportunities can be selling points for recruitment of early-career professionals to the college. Jesse related:

> For the position we explain to them all the professional development opportunities, whether it's going to conferences, joining book clubs, there are 6 different book clubs going on right now I could join in at the full-time staff level. So, I think we do a good job, hyping it up, but then we do an amazing job following through.

But when vacancies arise, the impact at the small, private university can mean having a small number of personnel take the burden for covering those functions when down personnel. Elena shared that the college has tried to compensate employees for additional responsibilities, and that has quickly become the expectation:

> Even if I'm only covering for a week or even if I'm only covering for 2 extra conduct cases or something like that. People would like to, you know, feel compensated for every last hour of their day they might be spending on something that is not directly . . . what they used to be doing. Something that felt really good to be doing has been taken to an extreme at this point . . . to be constantly peppered with these requests for staffing . . . job descriptions, reviews, and compensation reviews because folks feel like well, it happened to this person, and they got something, what about me?

Elena shared a concrete example of what her team experiences when she is down a community director at a small college, such as this one. Elena discussed, "So, at a 6,000-person institution, to have two people doing conduct, you know, you can't survive unless you have our 10 hearing officers at the base level of what they do." When faced with vacancies close to the start of the academic year, the college has had to compromise the minimum qualifications to fill positions, which has an impact on their ability to retain staff to the role. Elena continued, sharing, "these folks are hired and then have not retained to the position, or were not able to meet our expectations, since they did not meet minimum qualifications."

The other impacts include loss of institutional knowledge and impact on campus partnerships. While the community directors have turned over at a high rate, Elena described it as, "my entire entry-level staff has been around for less than 2 years." The weight of the constant turnover of staff is immense. Elena summarized,

> Huge impact I would say, I mean, not just vacancies, I'd say, but just turnover

> generally. . . . But the loss of knowledge you have, when you have turnovers, every single year in a community, and you're trying to build relationships with partners with our faculty directors that live in. And, we have been able to retain our faculty that are living in our halls. . . . And so having one of those people turn over every year, but only the faculty remain, is definitely felt. I think they have felt like we are not as present in that partnership. And it's a lot of learning, a lot of exhaustion on their part, kind of re-teaching every single year. . . . It has been exhausting and, and tough for a lot of folks.

The organizational structure relies on personnel to pass down institutional knowledge for smooth transitions from one person to the next. Elena explained that she has had to develop new materials to address the void: "manuals and processes had to be developed, since there was no cohesive overlap of staff from one person to the next."

The recruitment challenges that the participants in the current case study have described are the result in an evolving employment environment. The changes and variations in minimum wage requirements between states and regions have impacted recruitment efforts due to cost-of-living differences. The college has made efforts to promote professional development opportunities for their department personnel, as well as adjusted minimum qualifications for positions, since the duties of community directors are so vital to the institution. Covering for missing personnel and the impact that continual staffing shortfalls have on the retention of institutional knowledge is prevalent in the current study.

Autonomy

Early-career housing professionals may experience higher levels of autonomy due to a leaner staffing model. This autonomy can mean less supervision and oversight, as well as more opportunities for these professionals to self-direct their work, including having higher levels of responsibility.

Emma, a 30-year-old administrator with 5 years of experience in her third year as a community director at the college, believes that there is an emphasis on trust in her decision-making that gives her independence in her work. Emma shared,

> I do feel that I am trusted, um, because of my previous work experience, and everything I'm bringing to the table, you know. I'm trusted to make decisions and they also reiterate, you know, how we are, you know, we are the community directors. We know the neighborhood. We know the students. We can make the choices and make decisions that work best for our neighborhoods. So, there's a heavy emphasis on that.

Julie, a 26-year-old community director came to the college with previous experience as well, and thinks that the difference in autonomy relates to the private nature of the college. She stated, "that's one thing I think is very different from my previous institution." She continued, "[The college] being a private institution, versus I was at a public institution. Just the parameters of what you can do are so different. And I noticed that when I was even a grad student."

Peggy's assessment was slightly different from what Emma and Julie had to say. She believes that the autonomy in her work is strongly linked to the circumstance, and she has seen differences in how this plays out on different campuses:

> I have like a medium level of autonomy. I have more than I had in my previous institution, where basically every decision I made was either vetoed or just had to go through many channels that I wasn't really making any decisions. I get to make more here, especially with being over the entire neighborhood.

Peggy went on to say that when a parent gets involved, often the decision-making authority shifts dramatically up the reporting chain, asserting, "there are certain things that still do get vetoed." She continued:

> Even if I reach out for advice handling the situation, the moment a parent gets involved [the director] is involved. I was told verbatim that we take the path of least resistance . . . they get their parents to call and email. I'll tell their parents the same thing, walk them through the process. They don't like that so then they reach out to [the director]. So, then I get told we can make this exception.

Lillian supports Peggy's point of view that the autonomy in her job is closely linked to the situation at hand. She distinguishes building and neighborhood management as being primarily independent and collaborative, with a faculty member who lives in residence in her community. She said, "You know, in the building, um, we kind of control what we want." That control extends to theme of her neighborhood: staff programming. However, she asserted that when it comes to budget decisions or facilities management, things are slightly different:

> You know, there are some constraints around, like, here's X amount of dollars that you have for this. What programming we do completely up to us within, like, our budget. . . . You know, facilities and other more operational side of things, we

> don't have as much control, which is fine on standardization in terms of like, room changes."

But in terms of her day-to-day experience, Lillian shard she has personal freedoms:

> I get to essentially come in when I want and to leave when I want. Committees that I want to join or be a part of . . . and opportunities to go to conferences. Like, we have a lot of autonomy here in my role with care and conduct, and it's not great sometimes when you just want a standardized plan . . . and so it's very hard to kind of figure out what works best for you.

Irene acknowledges the autonomy in her experience is situational. She asserted, "It's kind of hard to place, like, guardrails on everyone that makes sense for everyone." As a result, she deems the flexibility the community directors have as being necessary in some places, but not in others, such as opening and closing of the building. However, Irene does agree with a number of the other community directors about the programming responsibilities and problem-solving aspects, saying, "we're pretty autonomous in that."

Roselle expected a level of autonomy as a community director, dating back to when she was recruited into the role. She shared her struggles with the autonomy she is given and her desire to have more mentorship and guidance:

> When I came to the college, someone told me that I would not be micro-managed here because nobody had time to manage me. But I didn't quite understand what that meant, and I very much do now. I've come up with a phrase. It's almost a false empowerment, because it can get flipped. It's like, no, no, no, you can do this. This is my first full-time position. But, there are times I wish someone would give me a little less autonomy and control, because I feel like I need a little bit

more mentorship than I'm able to be given just based on people's capacities and turnover.

The current case study participants described their work as autonomous and micromanaged at the same time. Participants interviewed revealed that often they are left to do their work with little supervision based on their own experiences and the particular role they are fulfilling, such as programming and staff supervision. They revealed that they can set their own schedules as well, but that autonomy has limits when completing operational duties and in situations where their judgement is overridden by a manager, such as when parents call and complain about a decision they have made.

Theme 4: Scaffolded Experience

The central theme of scaffolded experience addresses the perceived experience of early-career professionals as they enter the field and begin work. The current case study revealed four subthemes: graduate-level preparation (coded as "grad prep"); assessment of the job-ready skills (coded as "job skills'); the onboarding experience (coded as "onboarding job experience"); and mentorship (coded as "mentorship"). The first subtheme, graduate-level preparation, highlights the educational coursework and fieldwork related to the current position. Assessment of job-ready skills reflects the competencies that the community directors and their supervisors perceive are required for performing the duties of the job. The subtheme onboarding underscores the perceived training of the community directors following hire and how that has played out in their actual job experience. The final subtheme of mentorship reveals the experience of community directors in developing and seeking mentoring relationships in their careers,

from graduate school to current day, to support them in their role and provide professional guidance in their career.

Graduate-Level Preparation

There are a variety of entry points to the career of working in a hall director-like position. While traditional preparation often includes a master's program and field experiences such as a graduate assistantship, some programs will only require a bachelor's degree and some experience, or will have a master's optional requirement. Programs of study in higher education administration, college student development, or related fields are acceptable qualifications.

At the college in the current study, Julie shared that a graduate apprenticeship, assistantship, and internship helped apply her classroom learning to her work as a community director. While she attributed learning concepts and theories to her studies, she reflected,

> In the classroom, we learned a lot about theories and just kind of like looking into the research about trends and student retention and student populations and how to effectively serve different populations. And we learned a lot in the classroom, but I think what was most valuable is the work that I was being able to apply from the classroom in my assistantship and my internship. I kind of touched on this a little bit, but my assistantship was in the housing department.

Jesse, a manager of the community directors spoke about how graduate school and the fieldwork experience both contribute to effectiveness in the community director position. Jesse compared supervising one person with a master's degree in college administration and one that does not:

> Graduate school gives you that initial foundation. I supervise one hall director who has their master's in college administration, and I supervise one hall director who does not. I have to be aware that when I throw out things like, "Hey, we need to look at student development," or "Let's think about some theory," or "Let's look into Maslow," I kind of have to back up a little bit and recognize that they might not have had that foundational experience. And kind of have to start a little bit at the beginning. So, I think that grad school is an absolute time for you to get your feet wet to explore the foundations of the field, um, to immerse yourself in student development and development theory. But it's also a great time to explore all the different aspects of student affairs.

Alison, in a similar role to Jesse, sees the academic studies in graduate school as a training ground for how to engage with students as a professional. This includes how to coach a student and other skills. Alison expounded,

> The grad school preparation helps when they've had exposure to how to manage cases, work individually with students. They can be very difficult times, and getting that coaching and that training and that skill building, that skill set working with various software, and just knowing, for example, in student conduct the rights and responsibilities that students have is going to be different if you're not doing this work.

Jesse also shared that having field experience as a graduate hall director before becoming a professional community director contributes to a smoother transition to the position in the long run. She asserted that serving as a

> graduate hall director for 2 years is kind of a learning lab, and you get your feet wet and you say, "Hey, I've got an experience. I'm supervising. I understand what that means when I say 'beyond duty' or when we talk about, um, emergency responses to sexual assault, or anything else." They've had that kind of foundational knowledge we can kind of dive a little bit deeper.

A *learning lab* is a good way to describe Roselle's graduate assistantship in housing. Roselle's personal experience of field experience bear out Jesse's points. Similarly, field experience afforded Lillian a work simulation experience that was autonomous and substantially relevant to her career preparation. She described:

> My first year [as a grad], I supervised a building of about 200 students and 8 RAs and they were all mine, like, I had a supervisor and she supervised me, but I was leading the staff meeting and I was doing the one on ones. I did conduct for that building . . . . In my second year, I was actually in a building with 450 students and 12 RAs.

Lillian's master's preparation included counseling skill development, which she has found useful in meeting with students in a variety of settings. She described it as a critical skill set she uses almost daily in her role that provides structure to her meetings and drilling down to how best support a student in crisis:

> A lot of the counseling aspects . . . I do a lot of student conduct meetings, holding students accountable, having them learn about, you know, making better choices. We also have student care and outreach at [the college], which works a lot with mental health and so those classes are pivotal, um, in me, kind of, you know. We had multicultural counseling with individual and group counseling and those

> skills were pivotal . . . the skills we learn, you know, how to sit, how to be with the students, we learned the steps to take, in order, of like, OK, we're starting. Let's just talk. Let's create a plan. We did all of that, um, in class, which was incredibly helpful.

Lillian also attributed a lot of her preparation to her master's program because she was not an RA or a graduate hall director. So, selecting a master's program with counseling components prior to entering the field was intentional on her part. She continued, "I wanted to go to a master's program that had counseling components because I knew how imperative that is." But even through her master's program, the fieldwork she took part in prepared her for working in student affairs with students. She summarized, "My internships, which we called *field experiences*, were incredibly helpful to really give me the, you know, the day-to-day life of what working full-time might look like, um, at a university and with students."

As a manager, Alison sees the importance of field experience in preparing community directors for their service as professionals. This is particularly relevant for early-career professionals, since many of them are close in age and life experience to students. Alison explained,

> Because this is an entry-level role, grad school also provides additional work experience, and a little bit of distance from that undergrad experience. It provides an opportunity to see the work and experience the work from a different lens. It's, to me, it's a good buffer between going from being a student to kind of like a paraprofessional, and then becoming a professional.

Graduate-level preparation provides an important training ground for early-career professionals to prepare for their roles in higher education. The preparation is not only coursework and student development theory, but in some cases a foundational knowledge base for the various functions they will serve in working with students at college. In addition, community directors shared how vital their fieldwork and assistantships were in giving them a real-life training ground to practice their craft. Those experiences varied based on the degree program of study, with some personnel perceiving their counseling background, for example, as being very transferable to specific functions as a community director.

Assessment of Job-Ready Skills

Peggy shared that her perception of the community director role was that someone needed to be able to take the "people skills she learned" and apply them to the higher education environment. She used words like, "supporting people," "overseeing," "planning programs to create community," and "supervision of student leaders." These intangible skills were present as many of the community directors described what they perceived their role to be. Erica referenced the position's job description, further building upon Peggy's list of skills and responsibilities of a community director, stating,

> Definitely, non-verbals, conflict management, things like that, which is obviously really helpful in a profession where your day-to-day is speaking with students and . . . so generally speaking . . . social psychology. So, group behaviors, and same thing with leadership and groups and how to be a good leader.

Jesse described other intangible skills—patience, organization, and follow-through—when describing the skills she believes that community directors need to be successful in a role like this. She expounded,

> They're growing their own path right now, so it's realizing that you do have to be patient with our students and help them understand that, even though you're very familiar with how to appropriately communicate how to schedule your life, how to be at meetings, how to be on time how to get your work done our students staff the RAs, our students are not there or at that very stage right now. So, to that point, patience is key.

Jesse continued to explain that the demands of this role, and needing to constantly reach out to students or to find students requires organization and follow-through. She discussed:

> My number one would be to stay organized. I think number two would be follow-through. There's relentless follow-through as an absolute must and every level of every position, whether it's poking students again and again, poking staff again and again, or even supervising up and poking your supervisor to get what you need . . . so follow-through is vital.

Roselle shared that in this role she often has to determine which of many priorities is most important. But, she described that much of that prioritization is linked to problem-solving and that to be successful, one must be an effective problem solver and prioritization guru. She explained:

> You have to learn to prioritize, and I think that's one of those pieces of advice that gets thrown out a lot. And, I think it's something you really have to dig into and

> figure out what that means to you. And so, thinking about: What's needed in this moment? What can we do now? What are the main goals? How do we, you know, band-aid this for the day? What's the long term? What campus partners can I bring in to assist with this? Try not to take it all on myself, and how do I delegate?

Emma agreed with Roselle, stating that finding the appropriate outcome in responding to student concerns involves finding common ground. She emphasized the importance of finding "a good solution or common ground, where everybody can win a little something out of it and it's just not a total lose-lose situation."

Not only are the intangible skills important, but Jesse believes that proficiency in technical areas of expertise impacts the day-to-day work of a community director today. With a variety of systems available to assist college personnel as they engage with students, Jesse stated that staying abreast of technological aids is essential. She described:

> Technology is such a huge component. And, there are 50 or so different systems that every school uses differently. You do have to invest in time in training yourself and your staff to make sure they know how to use the right databases for housing assignments, conduct, and care case management. And, our website.

The "Community Director Onboarding Schedule," dated June 5, 2023, for Erica, supported Jesse's perspective that technology training is a significant component. The schedule included a 1-hour training session entitled, "Overview of Technology and Resources" on the first day. Included in the description are 13 different bullet points citing software or platforms for the session including: "Training schedule/calendar invites; IThelpdesk; Fixit; Groupme; Listservs; SharePoint; Qualtrics; Wordpress; Canva; Social Media; Maxient; THD/Keywatcher/Lenel; and Roomie." In addition, the schedule

denotes 1 hour of training entitled “Technology setup,” with a description that states, “THD/Keywatcher/Lenel.” In a second onboarding schedule, entitled “Welcome, [Irene], [Emma], [Julie], & [Erica]!,” an additional session was included on technology for 1 hour and 15 minutes, including some of the same platforms, but also “PhoenixConnect,” “25Live,” “Moodle,” and “OnTrack.”

Alison would argue that looking across the field, there are differences in roles, departments, and colleges that would require unique skills for HRL personnel to be successful. At the current college, Alison believes community directors need to be effective time managers, as well as accountable and responsible workers. She asserted,

> I think the hall director position is different, depending on the institution that you go to, in terms of what the requirements of the job might be. So, for example, here, our community directors are hearing officers for student conduct, and they worked very closely with our care and outreach office and manage some of those care cases. That is not necessarily the work you would see all hall directors doing at other institutions. Maybe it’s just, I think especially here. We’re very fast paced. Time management, and being responsible and accountable are going to be critical skills, but also the ability to navigate conflict. That’s going to be inevitable, honestly.

Elena, on the other hand, with a senior-level perspective on how all personnel interact with each other, believes that the ideal candidate for this role needs to be professional enough to manage the closeness in age and experience to some of the students they work with. She stated they are new professionals being asked to “supervise

graduate students who are their same age and same qualifications, and so navigating some of those things."

The campus life division puts forward ways in which they will support their employees in their job experience. On the job recruitment website, offerings such as the "employee assistance program" are highlighted, alongside a sounding board with the college president called the "Staff Advisory Council" that invites employees to town hall forums to voice feedback to campus leadership. Through the professional leadership office, employees are also invited to "Employee Resource Groups" (ERGs) to help employees build connections. The ERG purpose stated,

> Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are employee-led groups formed around common interests, and/or a shared bond or background. These groups are a powerful extension of our Office's programming offerings, providing leadership opportunities for those who wish to participate in, initiate or lead a group and fostering a supportive community where all employees can experience a greater sense of belonging.

To be job-ready, community directors need to draw upon a wide range of skills to be effective practitioners. Some of these skills can be described as intangible, such as human relations skills (or people skills) in being able to work with students on a personal level. In reviewing the onboarding documents, technical skills such as navigating software and information systems are highly valued and supported by managers. In addition, the managers see a need for these personnel to be highly organized to manage their breadth of responsibilities to many stakeholders, and patient to meet students where they are at their level of development. This patience requires the early-career professional

to demonstrate and maintain a high level of maturity when working with students close in age and life experience to their own.

Onboarding Job Experience

For early-career housing professionals, the onboarding experience can be an important aspect of their job experience. It can shape how the employees view themselves as part of the organization and how the organization sees them. Onboarding can set the course to determine for the employee what is most important in their daily work, and how they perceive those realities can be unique to them and their experience.

In her role managing the community directors, Jesse sees the college as being very employee centered and focused on professional development. She stated that the college "is very much focused on being developmental and very focused on professional development." Along with that commitment is a strong desire to keep employees networked and informed on the latest trends in higher education. Jesse continued,

> There is a huge emphasis on staying current in the field, on advancing your own knowledge of any topic you want. There's a huge emphasis on "Let's learn together and let's be lifelong learners," which is so fantastic that that is a key component of our culture.

The professional development emphasis is further supported by the investment the college makes in employees, with a commitment to provide $1,500 for conference scholarships. The recruitment website stated, "The [division's] professional development committee provides topics for monthly divisional meetings, lunch and learns, book clubs, podcast discussions, virtual webinar attendance, and more!"

Professional development and onboarding extends to collaborative opportunities at the college. Jesse supported the recruitment website's assertions that opportunities to collaborate with colleagues on projects and committees are prevalent at the college. She asserted,

> So, for onboarding we get them hooked up with university committees with different task forces and . . . I get emails daily from . . . university-wide committee . . . opportunities for growth and development, upcoming events, upcoming lectures. Some things are mandatory, and everybody goes. Other things we can pick and choose what we want to get involved with. That's great.

In terms of training on collaboration opportunities, the onboarding schedule documents include a "who to contact link" as well as time dedicated to meet with campus partners, such as security, faculty directors, access control, facilities, student involvement, IT, disabilities resources, and security. It also includes tours of fellow community director neighborhoods led by members of the team.

A number of the community directors identified the strategic planning process as an important part of their onboarding. Emma recalled her initial days on the job and how the strategic plan is woven into many of their job functions as a point of emphasis by the college. She stated that the college

> is big on strategic planning, and that was heavily emphasized during training and onboarding. It's constantly emphasized throughout the academic year and just, even throughout the summer before the students come. There's a lot of planning that goes behind the programs we put on and the campus partners we connect with, like, everybody's meeting and working together. . . . Obviously, it is a little

> overwhelming, you know, being new coming in it was a lot. Um, but, I mean, at every turn they make it very clear how important everybody's role is in the success of the university and the student . . . their charts, their diagrams.

Erica supported Emma's sentiments. She stated, "my first impression was that the university is very strategic and very methodical." She spoke about how the institutional procedures, protocols, and planning processes are very strategic:

> How they approach just their overall planning as an institution, but also within the departments. You'll find the directors and whatnot are also very methodical and strategic about sort of the way that they present themselves and go about things, and honestly I found that to ring true.

Julie was blunt in her agreement with Erica and Emma about strategic planning's influence on her experience. "I mean, everyone is like gung-ho about the strategic plan," she said. And, that enthusiasm trickles down to the communities she is responsible for. Julie shared how the strategic planning process impacts her community:

> So, we are hearing about it and talking about it all the time: the institution's strategic plan. The division's strategic plan and how it directly points to the institution's plan. And then within our department, our goals and our plans. And then within our neighborhood as a community director, my neighborhood, this plan and how my programs align with that plan, which aligns all the way back up to build on the strategic plan.

Alison agreed with Julie, Erica, and Emma and explained that the strategic plan helped her see how her role fits in with the larger university, even from her first days during the onboarding process. Alison expressed:

> The moment you come here, we're already talking about the strategic plan and so forth. And I think because of that, um, our senior administration is very adamant about ensuring that everyone sees themselves as a part of that plan. . . . It's very easy to see where you are based on the different sections of our strategic plan and where you fit in. Even in our division, of course, we have departmental goals and so forth but well, we do the same thing for our division. Our strategic plan for the institution is 10 years, our strategic plan for our division is 5 years, and then we also go through, of course, assessment every year.

Alison's viewpoint is consistent with a manager's account as well. Jesse recalled:

> And now we're wrapping up a 10-year plan. We're starting another 10-year plan. We're doing a 5-year plan for the department and the division, and we have a voice in that. So, I have a voice in saying what our goals are going to be next year and what our strategic plan is going to be over the next 5 years. I haven't had that kind of voice at the table before at other institutions. So, I very much feel like, we are in control of mapping out where we want to go and how we want to contribute. . . . It's not just stated by some mysterious board that's in a locked room somewhere.

These impressions have left Emma with a sense that the college has a very cohesive approach, and from that her experience has been welcoming and in alignment with her expectations. Emma remembered, "you know, with the faculty who live in the residence halls, like, it's just a very connected place." The experience has been aligned with her expectations and first impressions. She concluded:

> I would definitely say from my first impressions to now, everything is pretty much in alignment with what first saw, that people really are generally welcoming. They want to help you. They want to, like, you know, get you connected to the right people, connected to the right resources so that you can really shine in your role because, you know, we really work together.

Community directors perceived their onboarding experience to be fairly consistent with their expectations. They described an organization very strategic planning-minded, seeking to maintain connections for collaborative working relationships and decision making. Professional development opportunities are abundant as an investment in community directors' growth as early-career administrators.

Mentorship

Community directors shared variable accounts of the role mentors have shaped in their job experience. Participants had mentors in graduate school and previous positions and mentors in their current work. They showed that seeking guidance from other sources is an important element of the professional development of early-career housing professionals.

Emma discussed that mentors she had during her undergraduate and graduate work influenced her decision to enter the field. She also expressed a common theme: that she does not feel like she currently has a mentor in this role. Emma explained that her mentor

> was still working in higher education, but at the time I was getting close to the end of my graduate program. She had mentioned that residence would be

> worthwhile. So, I would probably say I'm in between professional mentors at the moment.

Peggy is in agreement with Emma. Peggy can identify people who have helped her along the way or provided guidance, particularly while she was still in college. But, those relationships do not translate now that she is a professional. She expounded:

> I have my mentors from undergrad and graduate school. Um, I don't think as far as working in higher education goes that I could say there is one person I could say who has mentored me or has done a lot to guide me. I know if I have something very, very specialized in higher education that I needed to work through, the two people from my last institution, I know they would be there. But, it's not like the first stop that I would make, simply because that mentor-mentee relationship was never fully built.

Erica, on the other hand, has people she identifies as a mentor both formally and informally. Erica explained, "I do have a professional mentor. I would say it's my previous supervisor." But, she also has had an experience at the college where she has been assigned a mentor. She continued, "currently in the early-career institute that I just explained, we do have, like, a mentor that's assigned to us, like a small group."

Like Erica, Julie has a former supervisor who was a professional mentor to her. However, this mentorship relationship was while Julie was in college, and the mentor no longer works in higher education. She ascribes importance to the role that mentoring and support can have, based on her lived experiences. Julie shared:

> I'm a first-generation college student, and I didn't have a lot of financial support from my family, because I come from a low-income background and I was Black

> student in a predominantly White institution. So, there were a lot of challenges, and I think being involved on campus and gaining mentorship through advisors in the different organizations I was in is what was really beneficial. . . . I wouldn't say, yes or no to the professional mentor. I think so, when I was an undergrad, I had a couple of mentors who are my supervisors. Um, and they worked in higher ed, obviously, um. They have both left the field since then.

Irene and Roselle have identified different people who they view as mentors. Irene is working on developing a formalized mentoring relationship, while Roselle has developed an informal one with an unexpected person. Irene shared:

> I would say I've identified who I want to be my mentor. And I think we're still working on, like, what that looks like I think. In a lot of educational spaces, we talk about mentors, but not necessarily about how to build that relationship. We're kind of just like, "Go find a mentor."

Roselle, on the other hand, has someone she considers a mentor that she technically supervises. Roselle's program assistant who is more senior than she serves in a nurturing role to her. She explained:

> I'm very fortunate that we have we have program assistants or admin assistants here. And, my admin assistant is about my mother's age. So, it's a very unique where, you know, she's headed towards retirement, and I'm at the very start of my career and I'm technically her supervisor on paper, but I tell everyone [she] is the actual genius of the office. She's fantastic. And I definitely consider her a mentor, and I think we have a great relationship where we learn from each other. She just has so much experience in life.

Whether a mentor is present or not in the lives of the community directors, the college seeks to provide supportive coaching from the sidelines. The divisional recruitment website highlighted how the college celebrates the student life staff. Examples include “staff appreciation day,” “Divisional awards,” and “University wide events.”

The field of student affairs relies upon mentoring relationships between administrators and students to develop talent for future practitioners in the field. The community directors in the current case study shared how mentoring relationships were important to them, but many were still seeking a mentor on the professional level. Others have found mentors in non-traditional ways, or maintain contact with former managers when they need to seek advice or professional guidance.

Conclusion

This study explored the perceived job experiences of early-career housing professionals at a small, private university. The participants’ voices revealed unique findings, all of which contribute to job retention among student housing professionals. This study’s key finding is that the intensity of generalist duties of the live-in community director position at a small, private university are taxing to manage, challenging to compensate for with salary and benefits, and contribute to a short-term tenure of hall directors, leading to burdensome staffing deficits in the department.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction

The current qualitative study examined the job experience of early-career housing professionals and their retention to their positions, using a single-embedded case study design. Setting the study at a mid-Atlantic private liberal arts college serving approximately 14,000 students, the researcher utilized semi-structured interviews with residence life administrators at three levels of the department, a document analysis of the community director job description, materials used in recruiting of employees, and training/onboarding materials, as well as a content analysis of the department's website and recruitment landing page. This chapter will discuss the findings and connection to prior research, research questions, and theoretical framework. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the study's implications for future research and practice.

Discussion of Findings

Workforce challenges and retention to the field are among the leading challenges facing student affairs in higher education, leading to concern that these issues could imperil the future of student affairs on our nation's campuses. Retention of staff at small and private colleges has proven to be difficult, and the impact of vacancies is substantial in HRL, particularly in the climate following the COVID-19 pandemic. Having a better understanding of the job experience of early-career HRL professionals, particularly at small, private colleges, will help those colleges consider job modifications and the scaffolding of support to improve that trend. The findings of this study revealed that ambiguity overload; work-life balance; workforce shortfalls compounding the

autonomous experience; and a scaffolded experience are the leading challenges contributing to this employment crisis.

Among the leading findings in the research is the theme of ambiguity overload—the multi-faceted breadth of cross-functional, unspecialized responsibilities of the hall director position juxtaposed against the self-guided, independent job experience for professionals in the early stages of their professional career. Findings show that hall directors do perceive themselves to be integral to the campus function yet find the expectations of their responsibilities to be overwhelming and their work difficult to describe at the same time. They acknowledge that they are accountable to a variety of campus stakeholders, such as student conduct and facilities, in their daily work, making it difficult to find direction and answers to questions since those answers cannot always be found in their direct reporting line to a supervisor. Instead, the answers to their questions may be found in another department with which they collaborate. They often find the most direction in areas that are centralized and operational, such as the move-in process and room changes. Areas of their position that are more autonomous include staff supervision and programming. Findings demonstrate that the interplay between the job functions and the freedoms of independent work can make for a negative job experience.

A second key finding of the current study is the theme of work-life balance in the job experience of early-career professionals in these positions. The unique nature of the hall director position blends the professional and personal lives of these personnel because the position requires that they live in their workplace, a college residence hall. Work responsibilities can easily seep into personal time, since students have access to them after hours and when they are not on duty in moments like taking a walk, doing

laundry, or eating meals. The generalist nature of their role, as explained in the first prominent finding, may result in bringing on additional responsibilities, but also may be because they live on the campus and managers assume that they can take on additional tasks beyond the workday, or even should do so, since they have this additional perceived benefit. These intrusions into personal lives contribute to attrition from the position. There is a prevalence of burnout in early-career housing professionals, so a short-term tenure in the role may be inevitable, but also may be an understood reality. Managers, in an effort to retain staff, look to find solutions as they are experiencing retention challenges, including altering job descriptions, offering and highlighting professional development opportunities, and participating in compensation reviews. The hall directors perceive those efforts to be missing the mark, with some staff indicating their short-term interest in the field, utilizing the residence life/housing area as an entry-level opportunity in higher education, and others not seeing a clear pathway for growth and promotion.

A third key finding is how workforce shortfalls compound the autonomous experience of hall directors at small, private colleges. The implications of changing compensation requirements at the state and federal levels create a competitive advantage for institutions in states where the salary requirements and cost of living are higher. Comparing similar job descriptions in different regions can present a wide range of compensation realities for candidates. The hall director position typically appeals to entry-level employees and recent graduates, so if benefits allow for a greater ability to live independently both physically and financially, those positions will be easier for which to recruit. When unable to compete with compensation, it results in staffing shortages. At small, private colleges, the duties of individual staff are broader. Vacant

positions result in shifting responsibilities to the remaining personnel, further impacting their workload and job experience. Vacant positions also contribute to a department's ability to provide oversight, supervision, training, and a smooth transition to employees at smaller institutions where early-career professionals already experience a high degree of autonomy in their work. Managers report that institutional knowledge loss is a key outcome of the short-term tenure of these roles, particularly when staffing shortages do not allow for a smooth transition from one employee to their successor.

A fourth key finding is the theme of a scaffolded experience in the preparation, onboarding, skill building and job-ready training of early-career housing professionals. Hall director positions have variations in their educational requirements, with some programs preferring master's degrees in higher education administration or a related field, and others requiring an earned bachelor's degree as the minimum requirement for employment. The case study findings revealed that the college has recently made the decision to move away from requiring a master's degree in order to address some of the recruitment challenges as well as deal with vacancies late in the hiring season as the academic year approaches. Six of the seven community director participants interviewed have earned their master's degree, and one has earned their bachelor's degree. The managers, all master's-level professionals, articulated that graduate-level preparation in community directors provided their team members with a foundation of student development theory, thus making it easier to have training conversations than when team members did not have that same level of preparation. Both community directors and their managers credit fieldwork and assistantships with providing necessary and important job

training in advance of their professional employment, with those experiences being similar or transferable to their current work.

While in their positions, community directors shared that they employed intangible and technical skills to be job ready. The intangible skills the community directors stated they use most related to human relations, and were not necessarily skills they were trained in through their graduate program explicitly. Their managers identified maturity and patience as the human relations skills required to be job ready, due to the intimacy with and closeness in age and life experience to students with whom they work. Some of these skills can be described as intangible, such as human relations skills (or people skills) in being able to work with students on a personal level. In addition, the managers identified the need for these personnel to be highly organized in managing an array of responsibilities as early-career professionals for a variety of stakeholders. These intangible skills were less prevalent in training materials and were more of an unwritten prerequisite of the position. However, on the technical side, managers articulated the need for the community directors to be proficient in software systems they will use in their positions. An abundance of evidence of the value of this training was present in the training documents and was present in interviews with managers as well as community directors in the current study. The onboarding job experience of the community directors often harkened to a focus on the strategic plan of the institution. Each community director articulated that the strategic plan of the institution was present in the recruitment, onboarding, training, and their job experience. This included expectations that each of their neighborhoods has a strategic plan that relates to the departmental, divisional, and university-wide plan. The community directors indicated that this is a signature aspect of

the university's identity and demonstrated to them a commitment to the institution's connectedness and collaborative work style. At the same time, the community directors indicated to them a desire to build a mentoring support network, as they experienced during their undergraduate and graduate education. The community directors do not perceive that they have identified mentors in their professional career at the college, and those that do have informal relationships with former managers or colleagues that they rely upon for advice.

A unique finding in this study was the degree to which the institution's strategic planning process was a positive factor in the on-boarding process for the community directors. From recruitment and onboarding to training and performance of job duties, the strategic plan was the "map" to their experience, as participants described. This finding was supported by the strategic plan references in training documents through embedded links. The short-term tenure of hall directors suggests that their managers believe that buy-in to institutional priorities would be low, but the participants in this study indicated the opposite. The findings demonstrated that the community directors see themselves as a part of higher-level institutional goals, since their work at the community level and assessment of its successes has a direct connection to institutional and divisional strategic planning.

In summary, findings demonstrated that the ambiguous, autonomous, and often overloaded role of the hall director is characterized by a job experience that is autonomous but intrusive on these employees' personal lives. These experiences, without scaffolded measures of support, training, and preparation, contribute to ongoing workforce challenges for HRL departments at small, private colleges. The job

experiences of hall directors and the realities of small, private institutions including high levels of autonomy and recruitment challenges can interact to influence staff turnover in these roles. These findings showed that there are inconsistencies in the graduate-level preparation in the hall directors as well as a potential mismatch in training themes with perceived job-ready skills. The impact of these challenges can result in poor work-life balance on the part of hall directors that leads to obstacles retaining employees to serve in this capacity. Repeated turnover of staff at small, private colleges can contribute to a damaging cycle, with the burden of job duties reassigned to existing staff and losses of institutional knowledge through transition of staff, bringing about a job experience that leads to further job retention concerns.

Connection to Prior Research

Prior research has shown that retaining residential life and housing staff to their positions has reached an inflection point for the field of student affairs, given the critical role that residential living plays in contributing to student success and retention efforts in higher education (Fosnacht et al., 2021). Having a deeper understanding of the job experiences of these personnel can assist decision-makers in student affairs in addressing underlying issues that may cause the departure of early-career professionals at our nation's colleges (Mullen et al., 2018, Van der Doef et al., 1998; Weick, 1995). Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) found similar themes to those in the current study with regard to how learning competencies not taught in graduate programs contributes to a stress-inducing experience in early-career student affairs professionals. Similarly, the relationship among job satisfaction, employee burnout, and job attrition in student affairs, as discussed by Rosser and Javinar (2003) and Lorden (1998, as cited in Mullen et al.,

2018), supported the findings in the current study that the job experiences of early-career housing professionals, namely the ambiguous and autonomous work, can contribute to job retention challenges.

Findings related to previous literature by NASPA (2022) concluded that student affairs employees expected that their job responsibilities would increase by an average of 19 different functions, with DEI and web-based, social media, and online communication to be among the top areas. An example from this study that supports increasing job responsibilities for which the community director is responsible can be found in the position description and participant interviews. The description lists qualifications that include experience with diverse populations and a commitment to inclusion and equity efforts. The additional functions listed in the job description include community oversight, staff supervision, student contact, mentoring, programming, developing leadership initiatives, advising a neighborhood association, and serving as a conduct officer and in the duty rotation, among others. Community directors Lillian and Roselle specifically mentioned that the responsibilities for their position are enormous. Lillian shared that the position serves a number of functions in addition to supervising a demanding staff and overseeing a community, which can be overwhelming. Roselle coined the term "responsibility whiplash" to describe the unpredictability of what skill set she will utilize each day to deal with the duties she is presented with, ranging from conversations about the budget to meeting with a student about a heavy personal issue they are trying to work through, requiring an emotional investment in her work that can overwhelm her. At the same time, the community directors indicated that they have a high level of control and autonomy. As was shared by Lillian: "You know, in the

building we pretty much control what we want . . . I pretty much have free rein of my staff." But, Peggy noted with frustration that their autonomy in their role has limits. The community directors have autonomy until the issue involves parents. Peggy stated that often she will debate with a student over policies and sticking to a rule, but that will change once it involves the parent because the issue gets escalated to a supervisor and her decisions get overridden: "I was told verbatim that we take the path of least resistance." These findings support Karasek (1979) and the conclusion that employees working in high-stress positions with high demands and low control experience low levels of well-being. The supervisor's priorities and values are not always in sync with those of the community directors. From the manager's perspective, Jesse noted differences in how she expects the community directors to interact with students, using email instead of talking with a student: "our current professional staff seem so hesitant to just pick up the phone and call somebody . . . they'll send an email . . . like, hey, we gotta go to their room." This dissonance supports prior research by Tull (2006), who found that early-career professionals were more satisfied with their job when they had a higher level of synergistic supervision, with non-synergistic supervisory relationships leading to greater turnover of new professionals in student affairs.

In the way of training, Julie, a community director at the college, asserted that beyond theory, trends, and understanding student retention, the most impactful graduate-level preparation she received was being able to apply her learning through a graduate assistantship in housing. Julie's perspective builds upon research by Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) that looked at the relationship between job competencies learned in graduate school and job stress in early-career student affairs professionals as they start

their jobs. Irene, another community director, pointed out that she is not trained in all areas she is responsible for, but she is often the first line of support for students to handle stressful issues: “We aren’t licensed therapists or clinical practitioners, but a lot of the time students will come in and they’ll disclose something.” These stressors occur with senior housing officers reporting that 83% of housing professionals live in the residence halls with the students they serve (Wilson, 2008).

Building upon prior research by Lorden (1998, as cited in Mullen et al., 2018) in finding the reasons for the short-term tenure of the hall director, the findings showed that hall directors believe that some people can thrive in this role for 5 to even 10 years, with an awareness of how to handle the drawbacks, but it is not a profession for everyone. The findings also support Marshall et al. (2016) in concluding that work-life balance is among the most frequently indicated reasons for departure from student affairs jobs. Peggy noted that awareness of strategies for managing a work life and a personal life and performing self-care in this job is essential. She summarized, “People and institutions should be completely honest of the pros and cons of a role like this.” Similarly, Lorden (1998, as cited in Mullen et al., 2018) attributed burnout and dissatisfaction with work to be factors contributing to student affairs worker attrition. Research by Rosser and Javinar (2003) found a minor negative connection between job satisfaction and plans to remain in a job among professionals working in student affairs (as cited in Marshall et al., 2016).

Findings related to the realities of small college recruitment and retention of early-career residence life staff were consistent with prior research. Wilson (2008) found a statistically significant difference between perceptions of senior housing officers at large and small institutions in their level of concern about recruiting and retaining staff,

with small colleges having a harder time. Elena, the senior housing officer in this case study, described her small college's institutional culture as one of "positive dissonance," that the realities, or "laundry list" of things to get done with a small team, take priority and the areas they wish to improve upon such as strategic initiatives often become "back-burner things." Elena also underscored the challenges her small institution has faced in recruiting for community director positions, indicating she has had to modify job description requirements to consider bachelor's-level professionals at the college, in addition to reconsidering their marketing strategies to appeal to candidates from the local area. The institutional culture, as described by a number of personnel, has been an expectation of going above and beyond the workday and the 40-hour workweek. Elena shared that culture is being challenged by early-career professionals who expect to "feel compensated for every last hour of their day." These findings are consistent with prior research by NASPA (2022), with salary and compensation, feeling underappreciated and undervalued, compensation not being aligned with duties, and hidden responsibilities not in the job description as leading reasons for job dissatisfaction in the field. The institution has taken measures to acknowledge extra duties, Elena asserted, with additional compensation, but it "is a bit exhausting, um, for the institution to be constantly peppered with these requests." The website analysis builds upon Elena's points about chasing additional compensation by highlighting the additional value in the job at the college. The recruitment website speaks to efforts to provide professional development by committee with book clubs, lunch and learns, podcasts, and webinars, in addition to allocated funds for conferences up to $1,500. The findings indicate that compensation is front of mind for community directors and the hiring managers recognize this reality. Julie, as a first-

generation college graduate from a low-income family, noted, “I’m thinking about my future self, like, I have to be in a field where I’m making more money.” Emma had a similar perspective, looking for increased compensation while maintaining the convenience of the housing perk: “I’m also looking for an increase in my salary, while still kind of having those similar benefits of, like being a live-in staff person.”

The findings also support Mullen et al. (2018), revealing that early-career professionals expect better onboarding and encouragement in this role to improve job satisfaction. Lillian participated in her interview on her last day of employment at the college, and shared that her onboarding experience was impacted by the institutional climate over 2 years prior, when she was hired: “They said I would get lots of training . . . I thought I was going to get training and I did not really.” Lillian attributes this to being hired in August, and she indicated that the department appeared stressed and spread thin at the time with her position being vacant for 5 months prior to hire. Peggy specified further, indicating that the timing of a community director’s start date can impact the onboarding and training experience they have. She stated, “Unless you are lucky enough to start in the summer, you don’t get, like, an official training.” In contrast, the website content analysis revealed language about the side-by-side support new hires can expect in this role, working alongside “dedicated, caring, and supportive colleagues who are invested in the success of each other.”

Prior research by Oblander (2006) supports the fact that small colleges are characterized by multifunctional professional positions and tuition-driven budget models. In HRL, these themes rise the surface with the work of early-career professionals, such as hall directors, being closely linked to efforts to improve retention. Early-career

professionals at small colleges may inherit higher levels of responsibility sooner in their job with greater autonomy, due to less personnel and organizational depth. The findings show agreement with prior research in comments by community directors and their managers. Community director Roselle noted she seeks more mentoring and less responsibility in her role: “There are times I wish someone would give me a little less autonomy and control, because I feel like I need a little bit more mentorship than I’m able to be given just based on people’s capacities and turnover.” Elena, the senior manager, pointed out that the leaner staff is compounded by staffing shortages and community directors taking on additional responsibilities and the nature of their role, which is already multi-functional, such as their contribution to student conduct. Elena observed, “At a 6,000 person institution to have two people doing conduct, you know, you can’t survive unless you have our 10 hearing officers at the base level of what they do.” This small college reality pulls the community directors, especially, in a multitude of directions. This often includes pulling them in the direction of working directly with students, other student affairs colleagues, and support staff, consistent with prior research by Hirt et al. (2005).

Previous research by Hunter (1992), Richmond and Sherman (1991), and Williams et al. (1990) looked at the decision-making process of recent graduates to enter this field of work (as cited in Taub et al., 2006). Since working in student affairs is not often a career choice of high school graduates, the role of a mentor or sponsor is important in the decision-making process to enter the field. Taub et al. (2006) recommended future research into the qualities that attracted recent graduate students to this career choice, and whether they actually exist in the work they are doing, to

determine if meeting expectations may contribute to retention in the field. The findings show that without experiences that put the graduate student in a similar role, like an internship or assistantship, as a hall director, knowledge about what to expect in this type of career is minimal. Emma focused on the mentoring aspect of the hall director role and wanting to work with young people, seeing a connection between previous work: "because that's kind of what I was doing previously." And mentoring is a component of the position, but it is not explicitly listed as a primary part of the job description. Peggy noted that her decision centered on how this role would build upon her experience counseling college students: "I felt I understood the population that I was going to work with, even if I didn't fully understand what it took to be a professional in the field." The findings revealed that other community directors were less concrete in the factors that influenced their decision-making process, indicating various functions of the job like supervision, student conduct, and programming, but Julie acknowledged, "I knew it would be more, but I didn't have a full grasp, but those were like, the larger picture things." One participant described her decision-making process as begrudgingly accepting her career fate with a willingness to try it on a short-term basis. Lillian noted her apprehension to interview for these positions: "Um, a lot of my peers in grad school were graduate hall directors, so they would be constantly talking nonstop about all the problems they were having."

This study did not find support for prior research that shows how the job experiences of student affairs professionals with LGBTQ sexual identity plays out at small colleges. While Kortegast et al. (2018) found four themes were consistent in those experiences, including: (a) disclosure of sexual identity (b) enactment of outness, (c)

assumed roles and responsibilities, and (d) recognition of support of LGBTQ activities, it was not a finding throughout the 10 interviews conducted in this study. Research has shown that student affairs professionals take on informal advocacy, support, and educational roles for LGBTQ students and groups at their institution. These duties are typically assumed without those responsibilities being a part of their job description. Personnel take on these responsibilities out of care for LGBTQ issues and in response to the lack of support channels for students and an unsupportive campus environment for these students at small colleges.

This study supports prior research seeking answers regarding the factors that influence early-career HRL professionals' retention to their position. The generalist nature and ambiguity of the hall director role; short-term tenure; training and development; and unique impact at small, private colleges are the prevailing themes impacting the work experience and career decisions of early-career professionals to remain in their position and the field of student affairs. Expanded knowledge about the experiences of these personnel can assist decision-makers in student affairs in addressing underlying concerns of job retention challenges. It is critical for higher education leaders to continue research on the topic of the job experience of early-career professionals to better understand the relationship between those experiences and their retention to their positions.

Connection to Research Questions

Through semi-structured interviews with 10 residence life administrators at three levels of the department, and a document analysis of recruitment, job description, and training materials, the findings revealed four principal themes: hall director as generalist

and role ambiguity; the short-term tenure of the hall director position; the impact on small, private colleges; and training and development. The following are the research questions that scaffolded this study:

1. What are the experiences of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals at small to mid-size colleges?
2. How do leaders within housing and residence life departments make sense of the organization?
3. How do managers or mentors of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals make sense of the organization?
4. How do the realities of the hall director position align with the expectations of early-career and new housing and residence life professionals?
5. What factors are most important for early-career and new housing and residence life professionals as they make sense of their role?

The first research question focused on the unique job experience of hall directors at small to mid-size colleges. Findings were relatively similar among the interviewees: most participants noted the recruitment challenges these colleges experience in the current employment environment and the external factors that influence their efforts to fill hall director-level positions. The data analysis showed that compensation was a relevant factor among the employees and the managers. For example, employees indicated compensation and benefits impacted their ability to live on their own after leaving graduate school, since the position offered housing and helped them achieve financial independence from their families. Both the employees and the managers described regional differences in compensation due to cost-of-living disparities. These

differences contribute to salary levels being elevated in certain states and cities and lower in others; the current study was conducted in a state where salary levels are lower. In addition, minimum wage laws play a significant role in influencing these differences in states where the minimum wage pushes salary levels higher than in other states. As hall director candidates make decisions about the desirability of selecting or remaining in a particular job opportunity, salary and benefits are compared between institutions, consistent with the principles of sensemaking theory.

Further data analysis found that the autonomous work experience of the hall director is a characteristic of the small college environment. Participants shared that the community director position allows for a level of self-direction in performing certain job duties, and not so much in others. Findings revealed that a less robust organizational chart is characteristic of the staffing model at a smaller college. Participants acknowledged that their work includes less supervision and oversight, since managers do not have time to manage their day-to-day duties in a way a more robust leadership team may be able to, allowing them to set their own schedules. This autonomy is conditional and circumstantial, with hall directors self-guiding the experience of their communities, the supervision of their staff, and their programming efforts. Duties involving room changes and move-in procedures, for example, are centralized and more scripted. The participants indicated when parents are involved in a student matter, however, the issue is taken by a manager and handled for them, with the manager sometimes overriding decisions they had made or policies they had adhered to. They described supportive autonomy when dealing with complex student care response, with campus partners working with them on the response serving on a care team. Additionally, the participants seemed to enjoy the

autonomy in the areas described, but the managers described that the community directors are often seeking more scripted instructions or procedures than are currently in place.

The second research question involved how leaders make sense of the organization. The leader interviewed for the current study was the senior housing officer. The findings were that the leader perceives the organizational expectations and the organizational realities coming into conflict. The data show that across the organization, from leadership to the community directors and mid-level managers, the institutional culture of strategic planning permeates the recruitment and hiring process as well as the training and the job experience. The senior housing officer perceives the campus environment to be "innovative," with employees that have for a long time been expected to go "above and beyond" their job descriptions, and have delivered on this expectation. It is believed that this culture is under some scrutiny, and the department and the institution are seeking ways to compensate for extra duties or taking on extra work from a departed colleague, and conducting a review of the pay scale within the college.

Further data analysis shows that the participants perceive that the leadership within the division, at the highest levels, understand the value and bearing of the community director role and residence life area. The data underscore the perceived pressures to find creative remedies to staffing shortfalls due to attrition and have led leadership to employ strategies such as lowering qualifications and incentivizing ancillary benefits like professional development funds and retirement plans. At the same time, managers are overwhelmed with the requests for compensation reviews, while dealing with knowledge gaps left by the departure of experienced staff with institutional

knowledge that has not been passed down to the next employee. The findings show that by using comparisons from previous employment experiences to make sense of the realities of this professional environment, the senior housing officer sees a significant uphill battle in competing in the job market in a state that does not have high minimum wage standards and in a region with a low cost of living. The perceived reality is that the competitive edge in recruiting goes to institutions in more populated areas with more progressive employment laws, which is frustrating and crippling to the department's ability to build the student experience they expect and their students deserve.

The third research question addressed how managers or mentors of early-career housing professionals make sense of the organization. Findings revealed similarities in the perception of the role graduate preparation has in the preparedness of personnel to serve and be successful in the community director role. The data show that the community directors most often reference the fieldwork experiences that contribute to their confidence and preparedness for their work. Managers see the combination of classroom learning and fieldwork as being required preparation for the community director role. Findings demonstrated that training conversations with personnel with background in student development theory contribute support their patience and maturity in the role, helping the community director manage the minimal age separation with students more successfully. Further findings revealed that fieldwork experiences gave employees real-life training, including understanding some of the terminology and processes of the department due to the similarities in how functions in student housing are managed.

Additionally, the findings revealed that managers and employees had differing viewpoints on the job-ready skills needed to be a successful early-career housing professional in the organization. The data showed the managers focused far more on technical skills, such as computer software, information systems, and applications, than the community directors, who frequently emphasized intangible, human-relations, and counseling skills. The focus on technical skills is present in the training documents, while the human relations skills are more present in the community director job description. Further data support the argument that the breadth of responsibilities of the hall director as a generalist at a small college requires superior organization skills, particularly of someone with little to no previous practice, and the ability to translate human interactions into tangible outcomes.

The fourth research question explored how the realities of the hall director position align with the expectations of early-career HRL professionals. The findings show the expectations described by the community directors have some similarities with the perceived job-ready skills addressed in the third research question. The data reveal that perceptions from past experiences, such as identifying the turnover and vacant positions during the interview process, caused participants to question whether the department or institution had underlying issues that would be problematic once they were hired. Other participant data indicated assumptions about the available support that would be present to the community directors in their role. Data supported that privilege surfaces in the job experience during contested matters between students and the community directors, such as room changes or a policy decision. These situations become frustrating

when parents intervene, causing managers to take over the matter and override or reverse a decision made by the community director.

Additional findings on expectations included the perceived primary duties of the role, many being human relations-oriented, such as interacting with, mentoring, and even teaching students in a freshman seminar class. Multiple participants expressed looking forward to the joys of building close-knit relationships with the student staff they would supervise, their fellow community directors, and the network of colleagues across the campus with whom they would interact. The data underscore the reality that the neighborhoods the community directors serve are isolating and the responsibilities they manage are demanding, making relationship-building between community directors situational. In a year when the staff were hired sporadically, the team had less opportunity to develop a synergistic dynamic. The group has instituted weekly meetings to foster intentional interactions, which participants reflect has helped them relate better. The data did support that they entered the field with a passion for working with students, and that they retain this passion despite the hectic and overwhelming daily grind. The findings support that community directors identify a similar passion in others at the university, including the faculty, for working with students.

The fifth research question addressed the factors that are most important for early-career HRL professionals as they make sense of their role. The findings show that the most frequently mentioned factor among participants was the prominence of the strategic plan. The data reveal that the community directors consistently perceived the importance of the plan, the prevalence of it in their work, and the desire of the institution and their supervisors that they see the role they play in executing the plan. The participants shared

that they saw themselves in the strategic plan "map" as front-facing contributors and as retention officers, also contributing their own sub-plans for how their community development feeds into the departmental, divisional, and university master plan. An abundance of documents, such as manuals, goals, expectations, program implementation plans, campus plans, transition reports, and policy documents, outline the roadmap and connectedness of the institution, and the community directors are exposed to these items as early as their onboarding process. The rationale, philosophy, and intentionality of their work is documented clearly.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that the community directors autonomously navigate student matters, as they describe, in contrast to the plethora of materials that outline the vision for their work. The data support a desire for more standardized approaches between the neighborhoods to unite the community directors. In addition, the findings show that the level of responsibility and work-life sacrifices of the community directors is out of line with the compensation; hence, efforts to document the amount of time the community directors should dedicate to the different functional areas they are responsible for.

Connections to Theoretical Framework

The findings associate well with the theoretical framework used to guide this study. The current study utilized the theoretical framework of Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory, which is how people make sense of the world and structure the unknown into some form of a framework. Through a series of personal and interactive experiences, individuals make sense using seven properties: (a) "identity construction" (how a person sees themselves); (b) "retrospective" (the "meaningful lived experience");

(c) “enactment” (how understanding of the “environment” results in how we act); (d) “docial” (how meaning is derived from a shared experience, language, or interaction); (e) “ongoing” (it never starts, it is always happening); (f) “extracted cues”(“products” rather than “processes”); and (g) “plausible” (“sensory experience plus what is reasonable”; Weick, 1995, p. 17).

This study found that hall directors made sense of their job experience through a variety of individual and socialized experiences that interact to form their impressions and inform their decision making about returning to their job and continuing in the field. Participant data indicated that “identity construction” for the hall directors included the identification of key identities that led them to the career in student affairs, such as first-generation college student, educators as family members, regional connections, and race or ethnicity. The findings underscored “retrospective” as experiences with residence life during undergraduate studies, such as serving as an RA or impressions formed during graduate school through internships and assistantships as determining factors in the hall directors’ decisions to enter the profession (Weick, 1995). Perez (2016) identified the “dual training” elements used in student affairs preparation (academic and fieldwork). Those employees who are missing elements of their preparation rely more on “retrospective,” expecting their graduate training will be their guide for how they will do their work (Perez, 2016). The data in the current study supported that retrospective also included the role that past mentors played in directing them to the field during their college careers. The onboarding process of the hall directors, specifically the strategic planning roadmap, helped them see their value and contributions to the greater

institutional mission and department goals, representing Weick's principle of "enactment" (Weick, 1995).

In addition, the findings suggest that the sensemaking principle "social" plays out in the autonomy of the hall director role and the shared experiences of the hall directors in the various neighborhoods. Despite similar responsibilities, each hall director at the college can develop a unique modality of delivery of programming and staff supervision in their community rather autonomously. The data demonstrate that incumbents appreciate the level of autonomy in their work in the flexibility to make their own schedules, but the autonomy is challenging in the lack of structure or expectations. This "social" experience is compounded by the turnover of staff and lack of the transmission of institutional knowledge from one person to the next, which is very impactful in a position with short-term tenure and high levels of cross-functional responsibility. Work-life balance represents the "ongoing" principle of sensemaking, in that the hall directors can consistently observe their job experience interacting with their daily lives since the position is live-in and often involves evening and after-hours commitments (Weick, 1995). When additional responsibilities extend beyond the traditional workday, the hall directors are faced with reminders of how their job experience limits their personal freedoms and taps into their personal time, whether it is meeting a student while walking on campus or being assigned an additional responsibility from a supervisor because they live on campus. The data show that the ongoing component of their work has led to a greater demand for compensation for additional work, particularly when the root of this work is due to staff shortages or requests beyond the traditional work hours.

The findings reveal that the hall directors navigate an ambiguous job experience characterized by a wide array of responsibilities that makes them a generalist at the college with very little previous experience to draw upon. The "extracted cues" the hall director can utilize to understand their role are abundant, from the variety of written plans, manuals, protocols, goals, job description, marketing materials, and web content available to them (Weick, 1995). The data show consistently that the participants see these materials as successful in providing a framework for what the hall directors are responsible for and how they fit within the organization's master plan. The findings reveal that when their responsibilities present challenges, the hall directors seek answers from supervisors, the functional area leaders they work closely with, and their fellow hall director colleagues, in a form of social validation. Perez (2016) found that early-career professionals lacked "social context" and compensated by using their managers and colleagues to fill in their knowledge gaps. This process helps the hall director create "plausible" solutions and explanations for their experiences (Weick, 1995). These findings build upon research by Perez and by Gardner (2022), who studied sensemaking theory in student affairs socialization for new employees and how faculty made sense of their sabbatical experiences. The social validation process is critical to the hall director role; with multiple personnel serving in the same role, they can test possible ideas and solutions and seek feedback from each other. The findings show that when the social validation channels of communication are open, the hall directors find their job experience to be more enjoyable, as was described by participants comparing the hall director cohort from the previous year and the current year of the study.

Limitations

The limitations to this study include the timeframe in which the study was conducted, the number of participants interviewed, and the gender of participants. The collection of data for the current study was between November 2023 and January 2024. The time period for interviews was 10 days, allotted by the senior housing officer to coincide with downtime for the community directors in between term sessions. If interview data were collected during the summer months, the researcher could have had more time to spend with participants to gather data. Further, a summer data collection period would have allowed for the participation of newly hired and departing staff members.

The current study participants were limited, as the design focused on a residence life department at a small, private university. A smaller college has limited staff, and within that limited staff are those personnel willing to participate. The department used in the study employed only female administrators at the senior-, mid-, and hall director-levels of the organization. To mitigate this limitation, the researcher could have expanded the study to include additional student affairs professionals at the college to gather their perceptions and experiences as well, not just those of residence life, allowing for more gender diversity in the study. Particular invitations could have been sent to senior leadership in the student affairs division, as they are key decision makers and stakeholders in the work of these professionals.

Implications for Future Research

NASPA (2022) has identified workforce challenges in the field of student affairs relating to the job experience and retention of staff as an existential issue facing higher

education. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a trend that had been on the rise hit an inflection point and has been described as “the great resignation” in higher education (Lederman, 2021). Early-career HRL professionals have been among the most vulnerable personnel to retain to their positions, and the impact of their attrition is perceived to be greatest at our nation’s small and private institutions, where staffing models tend to be leanest with greater breadth of responsibility per job (Wilson, 2008). With student housing having an impact on student retention, continued research on the job experience of early-career HRL professionals will provide needed insight into the underlying causes of this phenomenon.

The current study found that compensation and benefits disparities by region impacted hiring managers’ recruitment efforts. An area of future research worth exploring would be the job retention of early-career housing professionals by state, to examine the connection between cost of living and minimum wage laws. An additional area of future research related to recruitment is the relationship between the hiring timeline of hall directors and their job experience and job retention. The time of year in which staff are onboarded can impact the training experience of the new employee and the socialization of that employee with the cohort. The relationships among the cohort of hall directors relates to how the newly hired person makes sense of the institution, the department, and their role.

In terms of job readiness, additional research related to graduate-level preparation for hall directors is needed to study the job retention outcomes of fieldwork in student housing, such as internships and assistantships during graduate study. Also, research that would compare the job retention of personnel with degrees in higher education

administration and college student personnel, and other related or unrelated areas of study, would provide recommendations to future students on which degrees provide the most effective student affairs career preparation. Similarly, examining the job retention of personnel who have identified professional mentors and those who have not will be informative for hiring managers.

The current case was limited to housing professionals who identify as female, which is a limitation of the study's findings. Identifying a case that has more gender diversity, including nonbinary gender representation, would provide more meaningful findings for leaders and decision makers of student affairs in higher education. Also, examining the role gender plays in sensemaking, the job experience, and job retention to hall director positions would inform the onboarding and training process for hiring managers, as well.

Implications for Future Practice

With job retention of student affairs administrators in higher education continuing to be an area of concern, these findings can contribute to the body of knowledge on the job experience of early-career housing professionals, guiding future campus leaders at small private colleges in developing strategies for the recruitment, onboarding, training, and support of these critical personnel. The findings of this study expound upon four overarching themes: the hall director as generalist and role ambiguity; short-term tenure; impact on small, private colleges; and professional training and development. In reviewing these findings, we can better identify the perceived expectations and realities of the hall directors, job-ready skills, educational preparation, and training and mentoring

experiences and their relationship to retaining these staff members to their job and the field of student affairs.

The findings identify hall director as generalist and role ambiguity as the first theme, underscoring the critical responsibilities of the hall director position that extend across a wide range of functional areas and skill sets that play a role in contributing to student success and retention outcomes in describing their job experience. To support this job experience, future practice should focus on developing time-on-task modeling that will assist early-career professionals in understanding how much time and emphasis to place on specific job functions such as staff supervision, programming, student outreach, conduct cases, mediations, room changes, and administrative work. These efforts should be undergirded with distinct training on the expectations for each functional area with intentionally scaffolded support from peers, managers, and professional mentors. Where possible, campus leaders should consider further specialization for the hall directors that aligns functionality with graduate preparation and fieldwork experiences. With specialized training and intentional levels of support, hall directors can attain competence and confidence in their roles and feel less isolated as they complete their work. Furthermore, specialization for hall director functions would align employee skills with selective job duties, with expansion of responsibilities to occur incrementally as employees demonstrate and managers observe competence.

In addition, an implication for future practice from the findings of this study is addressing the experiences that lead to the short-term tenure of hall directors. Future practice must address the work-life balance realities hall directors face or risk continued burnout and turnover of staff in these positions. This involves clearly defining the

housing component of the hall director position not as additional compensation, but as a job requirement. Campus leaders should not overburden live-in professionals with additional duties because of the convenience of having them live on campus 24 hours a day. The demanding work of managing a 24-hour student population may require colleges to consider an expanded staffing model and greater levels of shift work, allowing hall directors to clearly delineate when they are on duty and when they are off duty. Moreover, this adjustment will point attention directly at the underlying issue of how work-life balance impacts retention of hall directors, rather than past approaches that have dangled perks, benefits, or incentives at these staff in an effort to compensate them for their personal time. With a more balanced early-career job experience, hall directors are more likely to see a pathway to a sustained career in student HRL or other areas of student affairs.

A third finding of this study with future implications for practice relates to the unique characteristics of small, private colleges that impact the job experience of early-career housing professionals. The findings direct future practice to deal with the reality that compensating hall director positions at competitive levels in states with lower costs of living and lower minimum wage requirements can be challenging at small, private colleges. To remain competitive, campus leaders must work with hiring managers to devise marketing strategies that place their positions in venues with positions salaried at similar levels, or that appeal to graduates looking for work in regions similar to theirs. The findings show that the level of autonomy hall directors experience in these roles can inform managers to identify and highlight the range of functional area experience their small, private university can provide for a new graduate, preparing them for their next

professional endeavor equipped with a skill set that can give them an advantage over their counterparts at larger, state institutions. In addition, managers can use contingency planning to develop concrete coverage plans and transition materials, with a pre-negotiated menu of supplemental compensation for when staff turnover presents staffing shortfalls and extended vacancies with duties the remaining hall directors need to take on.

Finally, the fourth key finding informs future practice in the area of professional training and development of early-career housing professionals. Hiring managers should consider candidates from graduate programs of study that include related student development or counseling coursework, as well as required internships and assistantships in student affairs functional areas that include HRL. The findings demonstrate that the combination of related coursework and transferable fieldwork experiences provides a training ground for new professionals, giving them a contextual understanding of the higher education administration profession and a real sense of the job experiences that lie ahead, as well as helps to subdue perceived myths and rumors that undermine recruitment efforts of managers. The findings indicate that hall directors are not able to identify mentorship relationships easily early in their careers, so future practice advises graduate programs to include methodology for students to identify professional mentors upon graduation to provide necessary professional guidance and support to them.

It is important to appreciate the job experience of hall directors when seeking to understand the retention challenges of student affairs professionals in higher education. Improving our knowledge of the hall director role as a generalist, ambiguous, and short-term position, as well as the unique impact retention challenges have on small, private colleges and the professional training and development experiences, provides insight into

the job experiences of these critical personnel. To respond to job retention challenges on their campuses, higher education leaders must consider these findings. In doing so, leaders should seek to align the hall director job functions with skills and competency levels and develop specialized training and time-on-task modeling to assist personnel in setting priorities within their abundance of duties. Campuses should redefine the live-in housing role as a job requirement, not compensation, and develop a more realistic shiftwork model of staffing to address work-life balance and 24-hour job demands. In addition, they can develop marketing strategies to promote positions in venues with comparable cost-of-living and salary, while instituting compensation-informed contingency planning for vacancies. Finally, colleges and universities should seek to recruit well-rounded candidates with relevant graduate coursework and fieldwork experience in HRL. By doing so, colleges can begin to address the underlying job experiences that impact job retention of hall directors.

Conclusion

This study revealed findings that surfaced consistently through participants' voices, focusing on the job experience of early-career housing professionals specifically related to their retention to their job. Following listening to participants' accounts through individual interviews with hall directors, managers, and a senior housing officer, and reviewing job marketing materials, training materials, and the job description, the researcher identified several conclusions about retaining hall directors at a small, private university. The findings of this qualitative research case study underscore the importance of understanding the responsibilities, stressors, and professional training and development experiences of these personnel. In particular, the hall director role at small,

private colleges is a complex generalist position with ambiguous and abundant responsibilities, having significant impact on achieving student success and institutional priorities. The job experience is characterized by a less robust staffing model, contributing to autonomous work but less autonomous decision making. Institutions experience recruitment challenges for these positions due to regional wage and cost-of-living disparities. HRL leaders in this study describe the organization with opposing expectations and realities. They describe the college as innovative and strategic, with employees expected to go above and beyond in their duties, amid the department reality of a highly competitive hiring market for hall directors and frequent vacancies. As a result, there is pressure to find creative ways to recruit talent and reward staff taking on additional responsibilities. Managers and mentors of hall directors make sense of the organization they work in by identifying the skills and preparation required for the hall director role. They perceive the requirements for the job to include graduate-level classroom learning; fieldwork in the HRL functional area; technical computer and software skills, knowledge, or training; and organizational skills to handle the demanding, multi-functional workload. The hall directors expect their work will utilize and showcase their human relations skills and passion for working with students, while at the same time they will develop meaningful relationships within the cohort. The hall directors perceive the realities to be a demanding position in which they struggle to balance their personal and professional lives, work that is isolating as they seek to oversee their community, situationally collaborating with and forming relationships with each other. The hall directors perceive that the most important factors in making sense of their role have been the abundance of documentation available to them that provides the

rationale, philosophy, intentionality, protocols, and institutional and strategic priorities that allow them to see their value and contributions to the institution's success. At the same time, they must autonomously do their part, but they seek more of an outlined or standardized process for their day-to-day duties.

These findings reveal the significant job experiences of hall directors at small, private colleges and how those experiences relate to their retention to their position. Knowledge about the experiences of these personnel and how they make sense of their organization informs higher education leaders about not only the underlying factors contributing to job retention challenges, but how those factors are interpreted by hall directors. The decision to conduct this case study at a small, private university builds upon existing data on the impact of the job retention crisis in this often under studied subcategory of higher education.

This research supports the need for improved alignment of hall director job functions with individual skills and competencies, and the manager delineation of priorities and time allocation to organize the abundance of duties. Colleges need to redefine the relationship between the live-in housing benefit and a more realistic shiftwork model of staffing to address work-life balance and overwhelming job demands. Hiring managers need to develop new marketing strategies to position job announcements in favorable venues, considering cost-of-living and salary limitations, while recruiting from candidates with relevant graduate coursework and fieldwork experiences that prepare them to contribute on their first day. In taking these steps, colleges and universities can begin to address the underlying job experiences that impact the retention of hall directors.

APPENDIX A CONSENT FORM

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a study on the factors that shape the performance and experiences of early-career housing professionals in their jobs and their decisions to remain in their positions conducted by Eric Finkelstein, Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs at St. John's University, a study that has received endorsement from the Association of College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I). As part of this study, I am interviewing housing and residence life personnel about the different factors that influence their performance, experience on the job and how they make sense of their workplace.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in one interview that takes place between November and December 2023. The interviews will be approximately 45 minutes in length, and are made up of a series of reflective questions. During the interview, I will be asking you questions about your job and your work environment. Interviews will be conducted virtually through Cisco Webex. The sessions will be recorded using the Voice Recorder i-phone application. Recordings will be stored in a secure Microsoft 365, OneDrive location that is password protected. You may review these audios and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed.

There are no anticipated risks associated with your participation beyond those of everyday life. While there is no direct benefit for your participation in the study, it is reasonable to expect that a result of your participation will provide researchers and practitioners with information about hiring, training, and professional development information. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, if you prefer not to answer a question, or if you want to end this interview for any reason – just let me know.

As a participant, your identity will be kept confidential and your name or the name of your building or University will not be included on any forms, in the transcription of our interview, data analysis, or in the summary report. Instead, participants will be identified by number. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant; it will be stored securely in the office of the Principal Investigator available only to the Principal Investigator. Data collected will be destroyed at the end of the legally prescribed time frame, which is 3 years. If you are interested in securing a copy of the results, you may contact the Principal Investigator. Aggregated results may be published in academic venues to inform educational researchers and practitioners.

If you have questions about the purpose of this investigation, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Eric M. Finkelstein, [redacted] or [redacted], or Dr. Ceceilia Parnther, [redacted], or [redacted]. If you have questions concerning your rights as a human participant, you may contact the University's Human Subjects Review Board at St. John's University, specifically Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair, [redacted], or [redacted], or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, or [redacted].

_____ Yes, I give the investigator permission to be audio recorded, use my participation and recordings from our interview in his dissertation, presentations, or future publications.

_____ I would prefer not to participate.

Agreement to Participate

_____

Printed Name of Subject

_____ _____

Signature of Subject Date

Signature of Principal Investigator

APPENDIX B INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR EARLY-CAREER HOUSING PROFESSIONALS

(The interviewee will review and sign the consent Form)

Thank you for participating in this interview as a part of case study research for my dissertation. I appreciate your giving your time out of your busy schedule for this interview, which I expect to take approximately 45 minutes. I will be taking notes and recording only the audio of our conversation so that our interview may be transcribed. The consent form outlines how I will protect your identity in my research and how records, including the transcription will be maintained and secured. Do you have any questions before we start? If not, I am going to begin the recording now.

1. Walk me through how you decided to become a residence life professional.
2. What were some of the factors that influenced your decision to enter this field of work?
3. Discuss your graduate-level preparation for this role? What parts of your coursework, internship, fieldwork, etc. best prepared you for this role? Why?
4. Before you started in your role, what did you perceive the responsibilities to be and how did you determine that?
5. How would you describe the level of control and autonomy you have in your work?
6. What were your considerations or criteria used as you identified this institution and this particular job for employment?
7. What were your impressions of the institution when you interviewed? How do they compare to your observations after you have begun work?
8. Do you have a professional mentor? Describe your relationship with your colleagues.
9. Do you find your work challenging? In what ways is it challenging? In what ways is it not challenging? In what ways is it stressful?

10. When faced with an obstacle or an unexpected situation in your work, how do you navigate that?
11. How did you make sense of your institution, department, and role? How has your experience aligned with your expectations? How would you describe how your role contributes to the mission of your institution and department?
12. Do you intend to continue in this line of work? If so, for how long? If not, what are some of the factors you are using to make that decision?
13. How would your experience in this role contribute to your ability to recommend this career to students?

APPENDIX C INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR MID-LEVEL HOUSING OFFICER

(The interviewee will review and sign the consent Form)

Thank you for participating in this interview as a part of case study research for my dissertation. I appreciate your giving your time out of your busy schedule for this interview, which I expect to take approximately 45 minutes. I will be taking notes and recording only the audio of our conversation so that our interview may be transcribed. The consent form outlines how I will protect your identity in my research and how records, including the transcription will be maintained and secured. Do you have any questions before we start? If not, I am going to begin the recording now.

1. Describe your experience in housing and residence life that has brought you to this point of your career.
2. What were some of the factors that influenced your decision to enter this field of work?
3. How does your department recruit new professionals? Describe your process for identifying candidates for hire. What are some of your expectations and criteria for selection?
4. How does graduate-level preparation relate to the work of a hall director? What graduate-level experiences best prepare a new professional for this role? Is there any indication that preparation expectations for hall directors have changed over time?
5. How would you describe the skills required to perform the hall director position?
6. How would you rank the responsibilities of a hall director from most important to least important and why? In what ways is the work of residence life and housing staff rewarding, challenging, and stressful?
7. Describe the organizational culture of the housing/residence life unit you work in. How do candidates and new hires learn about the
8. organizational culture?

9. Describe the relationship between the hall directors. Describe the relationship between the hall directors and the supervisory layers of the org. chart in your unit?
10. When faced with an obstacle or an unexpected situation in your work, how do you navigate that? How do the hall directors navigate that?
11. How did you make sense of your institution, department, and role? How would you describe how the role of housing and residence life professional contributes to the mission of your institution and department?
12. Do you intend to continue in this line of work? If so, for how long? If not, what are some of the factors you are using to make that decision?
13. How would your experience in this role contribute to your ability to recommend this career to others?

APPENDIX D INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SENIOR HOUSING OFFICER

(The interviewee will review and sign the consent form)

Thank you for participating in this interview as a part of case study research for my dissertation. I appreciate your giving your time out of your busy schedule for this interview, which I expect to take approximately 45 minutes. I will be taking notes and recording only the audio of our conversation so that our interview may be transcribed. The consent form outlines how I will protect your identity in my research and how records, including the transcription will be maintained and secured. Do you have any questions before we start? If not, I am going to begin the recording now.

1. *Describe your experience in housing and residence life that has brought you to this point of your career.*
2. What were some of the factors that influenced your decision to enter this field of work?
3. What has been your experience recruiting early-career professionals to your department in the last 5 years? Has there been any marked change?
4. What has been your experience retaining early-career professionals to your department in the last 5 years? Has there been any marked change?
5. Have you experienced vacancies in positions in your department over the last 5 years? If so, how many?
    a. What has been the impact of those vacancies on the student experience?
    b. What has been the impact of those vacancies on your other personnel?
    c. What has been the impact of those vacancies on your institution?
6. Has your department implemented any changes to the hall director job description in the past 5 years? If so, what changes were considered?
7. How would you describe the preparedness of new professionals you have hired for the role in which they were serving as hall directors?
8. Describe the organizational culture of your department.

9. Describe the relationship between the hall directors. Describe the relationship between the hall directors and the supervisory layers of the org. chart in your unit.
10. What factors are helpful in personnel making sense of your institution, department, and their role?
11. How does your institution describe how the role of housing and residence life professional contributes to the mission of your institution and department?
12. What is your outlook on the future of your field of work?
13. How would your experience in this role contribute to your ability to recommend this career to others?

APPENDIX E CROSSWALK TABLE FOR DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Document Type	Topics/Thematic	Evidence	Research Questions
Job Description	Role Ambiguity	Language about responsibilities match description of job experience by hall director and mid-level manager. Promotes "a shared vision that drives unit, divisional, and institutional short-term and long-term planning and the ongoing organization of work" (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, p. 29). Describe ethical hiring practices, institutional hiring policies and procedures (ACPA/NASPA, 2015)	2, 5
Marketing materials	Sensemaking Theory	Expresses the vision and mission of the department for which it is recruiting (ACPA/NASPA, 2015) Contents align with campus cultures such as academic, student, and administrative (ACPA/NASPA, 2015)	2, 3, 5
Performance appraisal	Professional training and development	Does the performance appraisal include evidence of effective use of feedback such as 360 feedback for improving individual leader and team leadership performance (ACPA/NASPA, 2015)? Professional development opportunities regularly utilized to determine the strength and weaknesses of personnel and provide them with opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge (ACPA/NASPA, 2015)	1, 4
Interview questions	Hall Director as Generalist/Role ambiguity	Describe ethical hiring practices, institutional hiring policies and procedures (ACPA/NASPA, 2015)	3, 5

Training or onboarding materials	Professional training and development, Impact on Small, Liberal Arts Colleges	Training processes provide opportunities for staff to engage in leadership development such as committees, task forces, internships, and cross-functional teams (ACPA/NASPA, 2015) Establish and sustain systems of mentoring (ACPA, NASPA, 2015) Apply the basic principles of community building (ACPA/NASPA, 2015)	1, 2, 3
Organization chart	Role Ambiguity, Impact on Small, Liberal Arts Colleges	Explains how job supports overall staffing model in work setting (ACPA/NASPA, 2015)	3

APPENDIX F CROSSWALK TABLE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Interview Questions	Topic	Literature Review Topic	Research Questions
D; 1–3	Professional background	Professional training and development	2
D; 4–9	Perceptions about department culture and retaining personnel	Impact on small liberal arts colleges; Short-term tenure/crisis in job retention	1, 2, 3, 4
D; 10–13	Sensemaking of work environment	Hall director as generalist/Crisis in hob retention; Sensemaking theory	2, 3, 5
C; 1–2	Professional background	Professional training and development	2
C; 3–6	Recruitment process and desired qualifications and preparations manager is expecting	Professional training and development; Hall director as generalist/role ambiguity	4
C; 7–12	Perceptions of organizational culture and sensemaking process	Sensemaking theory; Hall director as generalist/crisis in job retention; Impact on small liberal arts colleges	1, 2, 3, 5
B; 1–4	Educational and professional background and preparation. Expectations for current role	Professional training and development; Hall director as generalist/role ambiguity	3, 4
B; 5–10	Job experience of the hall director	Hall director as generalist/role ambiguity	1, 4, 5
B; 11–13	Sensemaking and job intentions	Sensemaking theory, Short-term tenure/crisis in job retention	5

APPENDIX G RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Colleague,

My name is Eric M. Finkelstein, and I am an Advanced Standing Doctoral Student in the Instructional Leadership program in the School of Education at St. John's University. I am writing my dissertation on the Hall Director Job Experience and Job Retention, and I am reaching out today seeking participants for my research study.

As an ACUHO-I member at an institution with 3,001 to 5,000 beds, you have been identified as meeting the criteria I am seeking in my participants for my study. Participation in this study will include a series of interviews, each 45 minutes with the senior-level residence life/housing officer, two mid-level supervisors of hall directors, and six early-career housing/residence life professionals/hall directors. The interviews will take place virtually. Should you choose to participate, consent forms will be signed in advance indicating that your personal information will remain confidential and basic demographic information will be collected.

If you are interested and willing to participate, I would greatly appreciate it. Please feel free to respond to this email, or call me at [redacted] should you have any questions.

Thank you,

Eric M. Finkelstein
Doctoral Candidate
St. John's University

APPENDIX H ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY HOUSING OFFICERS-INTERNATIONAL ENDORSEMENT LETTER AND RESEARCH AGREEMENT

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Endorsed Research Agreement
Eric Finkelstein

Last Updated 9/19/2023

After a comprehensive review, your research proposal has been selected for endorsement. Congratulations on your selection by the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International!

The purpose of this Agreement is to outline the expectations of the Association and the Principal Investigator related to the endorsement of this research study.

Study Information

Title:	*Hall Director Job Experience and Retention to Position*
Principal Investigator (PI):	Eric Finkelstein
Institution:	St. John's University
Email:	[redacted]
Other Team Members:	Dr. Ceceilia Parnther, Assistant Professor & Dissertation Mentor
Target Audience:	Senior Housing Officers at small to mid-size, private institutions
Dissertation/Thesis research?	☒ Yes ☐ No
IRB Approval Received?	☒ Yes ☐ No ☐ Pending
IRB Documentation Received?	☒ Yes ☐ No

You have been endorsed to conduct research as outlined by your submitted abstract:

Workforce challenges and retention are among the leading issues facing student affairs according to a 2022 NASPA report (NASPA, 2022). If unaddressed, these challenges could "threaten the sustainability of the profession" (NASPA 2022). Wilson (2008) previously concluded that additional research to examine the differences between colleges such as institutional type, setting, and size, and other factors related to on-boarding and mentoring are needed for early career housing professionals (Wilson, 2008). Using Karl Weick's sensemaking at a theoretical framework, the current qualitative study will further examine the perceived job experience of housing personnel at small, private liberal arts institutions (Wilson, 2008). With NSSE data showing that residential status resulted in a 2% and 2.2% increase in persistence for freshmen and sophomores respectively (Fosnacht, et al., 2021), the recruitment, retention and job experience of those personnel that manage student housing are very relevant to an institution's student retention and persistence efforts.

Liaison

- ACUHO-I Staff Liaison is Tori Negash, Research Initiatives Manager [redacted]

Required Documentation/Information

The following documentation or information is required from the PI:

1. Approval letter from Institutional Review Board (IRB). *This was received on September 5, 2023. No further action is needed.*
2. Provide a copy of the solicitation message to your Staff Liaison for review by ACUHO-I. *This was received on September 15, 2023. No further action is needed.*
3. Provide a copy of the reminder message to your Staff Liaison for review by ACUHO-I.

Terms of Agreement

ACUHO-I will assist with the recruitment of institutional participants on behalf of the PI. This will consist of sending one (1) email invitation as well as up to two (2) reminder emails.

The dates of these emails will be determined after consultation between the PI and the ACUHO-I Staff Liaison identified below. *Final approval of dates for all email communication lies with the ACUHO-I Staff Liaison and is subject to availability within the ACUHO-I Home Office & Research Calendars.*

With a target sample of one institution to serve as a case study, as specified by the PI, ACUHO-I agrees to send the initial email and up to (2) reminder emails to a total of 100 Senior Housing Officers from private institutions with between 2,000-5,000 beds.

The following dates for these communications have been approved:

Initial Email: October 2, 2023
1st Reminder: TBD
2nd Reminder: TBD

Deliverables

Within one (1) year of the completion of the endorsed study, the PI agrees to provide the following:

1. Host a webinar on the research topic for ACUHO-I members. The ACUHO-I Staff Liaison will assist with coordination and advertising of the webinar. *ACUHO-I strongly encourages dissemination of research through additional publication, presentation, or discussion, in addition to the webinar.*

Attribution

ACUHO-I requests that reports, publications, and presentations using data collected through the research endorsed in this agreement include a statement acknowledging the Association's support.

- A suggested statement is included below:

  "The research reported in this [publication/presentation] was endorsed by the Association of College & University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I)."

Signatures

As PI of this study I, Eric Finkelstein, will adhere to the parameters established in this Agreement.

[redacted] 9/19/23

PI Signature Date

ACUHO-I Staff Liaison

This Endorsed Research Agreement has been reviewed and approved by the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International.

[redacted] 9/20/2023

ACUHO-I Liaison Signature Date

1445 Summit Street
Columbus, OH 43201-2105

tel. [redacted]
url. acuho-i.org

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Making Campus Home

Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe
Chair, Institutional Review Board
St. John's University
[redacted]

Re: Eric Finkelstein IRB Application & ACUHO-I Endorsement

Dear Dr. DiGiuseppe:

My name is Dr. Tori Negash, and I serve as Research Initiatives Manager at the Association of College & University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I). I am writing today to share support for Eric Finkelstein's dissertation research and the approval of his application under review by the Institutional Review Board at St. John's University.

ACUHO-I is the leading organization of choice for campus housing and residence life professionals and home to more than 17,000 professionals representing 3.2 million on-campus students from around the globe.

As an organization, ACUHO-I is committed to the creation and dissemination of knowledge about campus housing and the broader issues that impact the post-secondary experience. We believe that our participation in research is essential for the work of our members. Each year, ACUHO-I invites applications for research on issues related to campus housing. The ACUHO-I Research Committee reviews these applications, offers feedback, and decides whether to endorse the project. Research projects that receive endorsement from ACUHO-I receive international credibility for the project, access to targeted member email list for survey purposes, assistance with improvements to the proposed study, and potential promotion of both the research and results in a variety of ACUHO-I outlets.

After submitting an endorsed research application, Eric's proposed research was reviewed, and approved, by housing and residence life professionals with research experience and expertise. Many have completed EdD or PhD programs, all have at least a Master's degree. The blind review process involved evaluation of his timeline, methodology, implications, dissemination plan, and the value his findings would have for the housing and residence life profession. After this comprehensive review, Eric received endorsement of his research.

Eric's qualitative research project seeks to examine the perceived job experience of housing personnel at small, private liberal arts institutions; specifically, it will investigate perceptions that influence the job experience and retention of early career housing professionals.

1445 Summit Street
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url. acuho-i.org

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Research in this setting, and with this population, is limited. Eric's work has the potential to elicit valuable insight into preventing burnout, increasing job satisfaction, and better retaining employees. In turn, these impacts on employees could lead to increased retention among resident students. His research is timely; higher education, and housing and residence life, in particular, have been affected by the Great Resignation and ongoing staffing challenges. Gaining insight into how institutions can better support their employees, as well as the job experiences that positively and negatively impact job experience, is invaluable.

Through my role at ACUHO-I, I serve as staff liaison for endorsed researchers. I will assist with Eric's participant recruitment efforts, including providing a randomly selected sample of ACUHO-I members, and emailing them, on Eric's behalf, with IRB approved messaging. It is important to note that ACUHO-I requires IRB approval before we will assist with participant recruitment. We understand the importance of the IRB review process, and approval, and will not act until approval is granted.

As you review Eric's application for IRB approval, I hope you will consider this letter of support. The ACUHO-I Research Committee has endorsed his research, and feel that it will benefit the profession.

If there is additional information that I can provide, or I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached at [redacted] or by calling [redacted]

Thank you!

Tori Negash

Tori Negash, MSW, PhD
Research Initiatives Manager
Association of College & University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I)
[redacted]

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Vita

Name	*Eric M. Finkelstein*
Baccalaureate Degree	*Bachelor of Arts* *Salisbury State University,* *Salisbury, Maryland,* *Communication Arts*
Date Graduated	*May, 1999*
Other Degrees and Certificates	*Master of Education* *Salisbury State University,* *Salisbury, MD* *Post-Secondary Education*
Date Graduated	*May, 2001*