MANAGING FOR OUR FUTURE:

USING A SENSEMAKING FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT STUDENT AFFAIRS

EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES THROUGH SUPERVISION

AN EXECUTIVE DISSERTATION

in Higher Education

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by

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Abstract

This executive dissertation assumes a sensemaking lens to investigate how Assistant and
Associate Vice President (AVP)-level administrators in student affairs approach their
supervisory roles within the current climate of higher education and employment. The study's
primary goal is to identify how leaders can prepare for changing employment trends and
transitions to facilitate and support positive outcomes and satisfaction within their departments
and for their staff. The COVID-19 pandemic cast an unforgiving spotlight on longstanding issues
within employment in the student affairs profession, which ruptured under the pressures of the
outbreak, socio-political upheaval, and massive demographic shifts. Though turnover trends have
plagued the student affairs profession for years, COVID-19 demonstrated the inability of
traditional human resource practices to meet the changing needs of employees and institutions.
This study addresses the following research questions: 1) how do AVP-level student affairs
administrators make sense of employment data and trends to inform their supervisory practice?
and 2) how do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of their role (relationship +

actions) in supporting staff members beyond university-wide HR efforts? To answer these questions, this dissertation employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. The main results of the study identified five themes, including issues of recruitment, retention, and resignation; shifts in worker norms; considerations of the identity of a supervisor; changing workforce trends; and institutional priorities. These themes notably revolved around the need for AVPs to navigate various forms of tension. These findings have substantial implications for enhancing supervisory approaches to support positive outcomes for student affairs professionals, supporting recommendations for new pathways to the profession, and creating space for proactive versus reactive approaches to employment trends. Ultimately, the goal is to support increased satisfaction and retention in the field of student affairs. The findings contribute to research by addressing trends in an increasingly multigenerational workforce, supervisory approaches in student affairs, and strategies for navigating societal and demographic shifts.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my husband, Ben, who always has unwavering confidence in what I can achieve and has supported me up this mountain: there is nobody I would rather stand at this peak with than you. And to our children, Frank and Lucy: please always remember that when we fall, we get back up and that we are meant to do hard things.

Acknowledgments

Reflecting on the past three years, I wonder what I must have thought this experience would be like in May of 2021 when I saw 17 other faces on a Zoom screen for the first time. The reality today far exceeds anything I could have imagined back then. It has been a pleasure to learn from each member of this cohort. It is with love, gratitude, and great respect that I thank you for your dedication, humor, support, and friendship. Roosters forever!

Taylor Delhagen and Laura Abreu (Team TLC): what a gift to have you two in my life. I hit the jackpot when it came to partners in this work. There are no words to express how special you are to me fully. From our first small group in Proseminar during the summer of 2021 to today, the natural connections and bonds we built over these three years continue to uplift and carry me. It is bittersweet that we will transition from this EdD journey, but I am excited for our continued friendship and support for each other. Estoy eternamente agradecido por su amistad y apoyo. No podría haber pedido un mejor equipo.

I am honored to acknowledge my dissertation advisor, Dr. Christopher Glass, a.k.a. "Ted Lasso." You never had a doubt, you were always curious (and unnaturally patient), and most importantly, you always believed in me. I could write an entire dissertation about the qualities needed in an academic advisor for optimal EdD student engagement in the dissertation process:

The research methods would involve countless tagged Google Doc comments and endless reassuring emails. Data analysis would often involve student-advisor meetings where the advisor repeatedly encouraged me to speak what I could not yet write. The findings would show that students need a cheerleader who has faith in them when they feel lost and alone. Findings would show that conversations about favorite Taylor Swift songs are key to an effective team meeting. A key theme would be a willingness to respond both to academic topics and issues stemming from

the various identities we could not ignore on this journey. Implications for this research suggest that these findings will reduce feelings of imposter syndrome, loneliness, and fear of citation management and coding software. The significance of this research is that it reinforces that we are meant to do hard things and that there is a special place for meaningful and deep academic connections in this crazy world. (#straightlines).

It has been a privilege to learn from the faculty at the Lynch School throughout this program. I would like to especially acknowledge Dr. Heather Rowan-Kenyon who laid the foundation for the *first* (and best) cohort and set the tone for us to grow and develop as a cohort, as doctoral students, and as contributing members to our fields.

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I offer a special thank you to the 10 AVPs who participated in my research. Your interest, dedication, and commitment to improving the field of student affairs was clear, both in your answers and through your energy during the interviews.

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with me each day. I believe that countless students and other professionals have benefited from what I have learned from each of you.

I have been fortunate to have had a community around me on this journey. None of this would be possible without the support of friends and colleagues. Dr. Gina South, Jessica Regenhard, Sloan Knight, Jennifer McAndrew (and the entire McAndrew Family), the Poutas Family, Roatha Kong, Chris Darcy, Ben Trapanick, Paul Murphy, my colleagues in OSI and the VPSA office at Boston College, and all those who make up my various networks and communities. Thank you!

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Candidate Statement

Growth and Achievements as an Academic Leader

With the culture, climate, and context of higher education continuing to evolve, student affairs leaders must be prepared to navigate uncertainty and change both within and beyond the halls of their institutions. Supervisors hold a powerful position to guide and nurture their employees through challenging times. Effective supervisory relationships are critical to promote commitment, employee satisfaction, and ultimately, retention in student affairs. Research is robust around trends and best practices in higher education supervision, however, little is known about how and why individual leaders such as Associate Vice Presidents (AVPs) apply this knowledge within their institutions. There is a gap in understanding how administrators make sense of their environment and role concerning supporting employee satisfaction and outcomes.

My study aims to clarify this knowledge-to-action gap by examining how AVPs interpret current trends, data, and their experiences in the field to inform practical approaches in leadership. Specifically, the research centers on how AVPs make sense of societal, institutional, and interpersonal trends to implement impactful changes through supervision that may contribute to the well-being of their staff and institutions.

Looking Back to Move Forward

At the start of my doctoral journey, I was motivated by how institutional culture and climate influenced my staff and team while I served as a director of student involvement. I was interested in how I, as a supervisor, could support my staff through uncertainty and towards their goals while also ensuring my support of institutional priorities. Of unique interest was how I might learn and grow as a supervisor in an increasingly diverse and multigenerational workforce. I have supervised countless graduate assistants, new professionals, mid-level professionals, and

those preparing for retirement. I was energized by how I might influence this vibrant, yet traditional space of student affairs through my interactions as a supervisor.

I was the beneficiary of exceptional supervision and mentorship while growing up in the student affairs profession. As early as my undergraduate experience, through my graduate work, and my first roles in student activities and leadership development, I was fortunate to have supervisors committed to supervising. Being on the receiving end of that commitment and experiencing both challenge and support fostered my growth as a rising leader and eventually, a supervisor. I craved that challenge and support, and I valued the investment my supervisors made in my development.

It was with a conflicted heart that in 2017 I left a role, institution, and supervisor I loved to move to a new professional challenge. It was a culture shock, and I found myself trying to define how to serve as a director at a new university away from the nurturing environment to which I was accustomed. I soon discerned that the need I was called to fill was in my role and abilities as a supervisor to guide my staff. While I could not have anticipated the challenges that awaited me, this new role ignited a curiosity in my ability to support my new team. It is with this team that I leveraged what I had learned from past supervisors and mentors. I added my unique strengths and commitment to learning to my supervisory toolbox. I was professionally fulfilled in a way I could not have previously imagined and knew I was making a difference. And then came March 2020.

What Matters Most: Evolution in an Instant

Everything changed with the onset of COVID-19. Educational institutions felt the structural and cultural impacts early; impacts ranging from the time, place, and manner of instruction to societal and political debates over the health and safety of students and educators.

This instantaneous evolution revealed inequities many people knew were already there. The root of my problem statement involves the critical shift in how professionals are engaging with the field of student affairs today. The shift appeared to have come to a breaking point with the emergence of the Great Resignation following the initial spread of COVID-19. Deloitte (2021) found that "the COVID-19 pandemic expedited changes in higher education that many predicted would happen over decades, forcing those seemingly distant evolutions to happen within weeks" (p.2). Although the state of emergency and critical crisis response associated with the onset of COVID-19 has passed, the impact of the pandemic and the Great Resignation have forever changed the profession of student affairs and the field of higher education. The interactions, development, recruitment, retention, and expectations of student affairs professionals have changed, but like many systemic issues illuminated by the pandemic, these problematic trends of employment were not new (Gandy et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2016; Takawira et al., 2014). The demands of long hours coupled with increasingly complex student needs have led to growing burnout and departures from the field (Sallee, 2021; Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education [NASPA], 2022). It came as a shock to be among those who seriously questioned the profession and my future in it.

The evolving social, political, and cultural landscape in higher education necessitates an examination of how student affairs leaders will shape the profession's future; the field of student affairs is losing talent and institutional memory faster than ever before. Too often, student affairs professionals—especially those in leadership roles—are sought out for their skills in crisis response, managing complex events, working on the front lines with students in need, and being willing to be pulled "off the bench" when other duties as assigned arise. These skill sets and this mindset are often at odds with a proactive and reflective approach needed to support staff

holistically. Furthermore, many professionals are no longer willing to accept the additional responsibilities and expectations of more senior leadership roles or the cultural and work norms of past generations of student affairs professionals.

Leadership rooted in listening and the courage to advocate is necessary to advance responsive change in student affairs. A commitment to identity-conscious supervision (Brown et al., 2020) and inclusive supervisory practices (Wilson et al., 2020) can provide a foundation for meaningful connection and commitment for employees. For my supervisory practice, I find value in the Situational Leadership (SLII®) model (*SLII® - a Situational Approach to Leadership*, n.d.) and exploring research and critiques of multigenerational workforce literature. This commitment need not derive from a specific leadership or supervisory model. Instead, supervisors can purposefully integrate strategies and mindsets that recognize the unique perspectives, experiences, and needs of their employees and teams.

Learning in Community

To explore this challenge, I needed to acknowledge both the quantitative data from surveys and reports alongside the personal stories of student affairs professionals. Data is as diverse as those who provide it. To deliver data-informed solutions related to the lives of professionals, it was important to recognize that trends and data points need to be fleshed out to honor the humanity of the stories that inform various findings. Throughout the Executive EdD program, I have learned the importance of adopting a suitable approach when evaluating data to solve a problem. This approach is grounded in asking the right questions. For my dissertation, it then led me to plan the right methods to answer those questions. I chose to analyze my participants' lived experiences alongside current student affairs data and research. I lead with empathy as both a core value and an identified strength (Rath & Conchie, 2013). My process for

moving from analysis to action stemmed from wanting to hear from, understand, reflect, and offer something back to the community of professionals I aimed to serve: those committed to student affairs.

Future Directions of Academic Leadership

When I was a director of student involvement, I did an exercise with my team where I brought two images to our staff meeting for a reflective activity. One was a mirror and the other was a picture frame. We were struggling as individuals and as a group to find empathy in our work, with our students, and with situations that were in front of us. These struggles led to low morale, and a low threshold to manage frustration in our jobs. This frustration had a direct impact on our interactions with students. The exercise required us to look in the mirror and consider our own beliefs that informed how we identified and behaved as professionals. For the second part of the exercise, I introduced the picture frame. The picture frame was a tool to explore empathy, forcing us to think about situations from different perspectives. If someone puts a new frame around a photograph or a piece of art, you will notice something new. If student affairs professionals only do their work through the perspective of what they see in the mirror (their reflection and biases), they lose out on the potential that may be unleashed if they take the time to reframe. For me, this exercise connected to why the Bolman and Deal (2017) Four-Frame Model resonates with me. It also captured my interest in curiosity and questioning. NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2022) has argued that "In the next 5 to 10 years, student affairs will need to prioritize efforts to reaffirm long-standing values and reimagine how to apply them in new contexts" (p. 25). This reimagining requires both the mirror and the frame. There is a critical need to frame these values as individuals, at the institutional level, in professional associations, and within groups of committed stakeholders.

Reimagining requires data-informed leadership—both analysis and action. I was inspired by the Strategic Problem Solving through Design Thinking course offered during the third-year summer residency. Design thinking models are often prescribed as steps and options for activities that I feel can be restrictive. I am not a complete design-thinking convert; however, the approach offered in our course removed that rigidity for me and I became fully engaged. While there are specific processes, the approach was more customized to the mindsets that applied to the problem at hand. I think more often about questions: are we asking the right questions? Are we utilizing evidence of convenience to support a preexisting answer to bolster our claim, influence, or power? Is bias at play that might alter what is right, just, and responsive to our users? Weick's (1995) work in sensemaking, alongside the mindset shifts I learned from *Experiencing Design: An Innovator's Journey* (Liedtka et al., 2021), only furthered my curiosity about how professionals not only interpret but make meaning through the act of supervision. Mindsets I value for my leadership include holding empathy for the user, considering bias, and challenging long-standing values (Liedtka et al., 2021). These mindsets are particularly relevant to address issues facing the student affairs profession at a crossroads.

Three of the biggest approaches from the Executive EdD program that have influenced my work are asking the right questions, considering the audience and users, and how I might incorporate prototyping and feedback into my practice as an administrator. Throughout the program's core courses, our cohort was challenged to move from identifying problems of interest to defining a purpose, and finally developing questions to explore. For my research, using the right questions as a guide was crucial to contemplate problem-solving and decision-making in pursuit of supporting AVPs and student affairs administrators. It was important for me to use curiosity and empathy to center the exploration of the problem in service of the user, and not my

own needs. Finally, with prototyping tools for change, I sought feedback from trusted colleagues and peers in the field to inform my recommendations.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Higher education professionals live in a world that centers on and celebrates achievements; status is everywhere and credentials are built into our business. For most, a specific credential is required to enter the field—whether a high school diploma to enter college or a specific degree to access particular roles and positions of influence. Requirements are not inherently bad. However, given the challenges that higher education is facing across the board (e.g., rising costs, public distrust in the value of higher education, and increased regulations from government and court decisions), new approaches are called for to prepare the field and its professionals for the future of work.

I chose to examine the AVP role to find solutions to supporting employee satisfaction. Specifically, I hoped to gain insight into the support student affairs administrators need to help produce better outcomes for their employees and their institutions. I believe that the future of effective leadership in higher education must balance the practical needs of its people alongside the aspirational goals of the field. Better outcomes for individual professionals will support departments, divisions, and institutional priorities.

Leadership to support the future of higher education needs to be focused both on content knowledge (i.e., to work within different specialties) and on building capacities and skills (i.e., to be effective as an administrator). Examples of knowledge and skills are project management, supervising individuals and teams, and problem-solving. The development, motivation, and support of staff is a critical element of leadership that needs to be nurtured and reinforced throughout student affairs professionals' careers. One example is to critically review the

curriculum of master's preparation programs to balance content-based courses with skills-based competencies. Additionally, I believe a new approach to field experiences in master's preparation programs needs to prioritize elements of supervision, budgeting, decision-making, conflict and personnel management, and institutional planning.

An investment in the supervisory relationship is needed throughout all roles in divisions of student affairs. Senior leadership must prioritize a commitment to staff development using existing supervisory relationships. Targeted training on supervision is essential for staff with varying levels of workforce experience. Training should be ongoing and allow professionals to evaluate, reflect, and grow in their leadership. Knowledge is part of a solution, but it is not enough; being open to adjusting as the field, institutions, and employees around us change is pivotal. A reflective tool that can be applied throughout a career is necessary.

Success in all aspects of an AVP role is almost unimaginable in student affairs. AVPs and student affairs professionals are expected to combat culture wars, political challenges, and legislative changes. They are simultaneously charged with keeping students safe, healthy, and alive. It is therefore vital to understand how administrators respond to bureaucratic and sometimes unreasonable demands with limited resources and personnel.

Upon completion of the Executive EdD program, I will increase my impact by leading with integrity, empathy, and a strategic purpose. In my current role as special assistant for strategic initiatives in the office of the vice president of student affairs, I support the strategic priorities of our division and work on projects that support divisional alignment. Unlike my prior roles as interim-AVP and director which were more vertically structured, my current position enables me to have a horizontal impact across the entire division. This change has been bittersweet as direct supervision is a less central part of my role. Transitioning to a strategic role

with a 30,000-foot view, however, will stretch me to consider systems, structures, and cultures

that impact professionals beyond my direct scope and role. Despite this shift, my commitment to

organizational effectiveness, whether through supervision or planning, remains a core value.

I see an opportunity to reimagine how professionals frame their work, interpersonal

relationships, and meaning-making across student affairs departments. There is a need for leaders

to not assume they always know what their teams need and how they experience the world.

Professionals cannot say what will work because it has worked. In a way, I hope to promote

continuous reflection-to-action as a potential direction for success in supervision.

Chapter 1: Review of Knowledge for Action

Problem of Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic cast an unforgiving spotlight on longstanding issues within employment in the student affairs profession, which ruptured under the pressures of the outbreak, socio-political upheaval, and massive demographic shifts (Parker & Horowitz, 2021; Scharf & Weerda, 2022). Though turnover trends have plagued the student affairs profession for years (Mullen et al., 2018), COVID-19 demonstrated the inability of traditional human resource practices to meet the changing needs of employees and institutions. While the interactions, development, recruitment, retention, and expectations of professionals in the field may have changed, problematic trends in student affairs employment are not new (Gandy et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2016; Takawira et al., 2014). According to a survey in *The Compass Report: Charting the Future of Student Affairs* (NASPA, 2022) 81% of respondents believed that individuals leave the field because they feel underappreciated or undervalued by their institutions. This finding is consistent with results presented in the *Work Wellbeing 2022 Insights Report* (Indeed, 2022), where fewer respondents agreed that their companies prioritized their well-being over profits. The concept of ideal worker norms in student affairs leading to stress and burnout reinforced increased misalignment with the field's expectations and heightened departures from the field (Sallee, 2021).

Leaders in higher education must reconsider that issues of retention are not easing. Relevant strategies must be both immediate and ongoing (Bichsel et al., 2023). Kleinhans et al. (2015) pointed out that "current economic and political conditions are driving an unprecedented rate of change in academia" (p. 98). Trends and changes in fair labor standards; worker norms;

employee mental health; diversity, equity, and inclusion will continue to apply pressure on the literal and figurative social contract between employers and employees.

A New Era Forcing Reflection and Action

Higher education institutions have not all experienced the impact of COVID-19 equally, and the same holds for employees at these institutions (Brantley & Shomaker, 2021). Institutional closures, layoffs, and financial implications, along with how different institutions and communities navigated social unrest, shaped how employees and institutions rebounded following the acute COVID-19 period. These experiences also affected how individuals perceived the value of their chosen profession and feelings about work-life balance. The field cannot ignore data points from the 2023 College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) *Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*, which suggested that as many as 39% of student affairs professionals surveyed were likely or very likely to consider leaving their jobs within the 12 months following the survey (Bichsel et al., 2023). This finding is consistent with the prior year's survey (Bichsel et al., 2022). The 2022 data showed that many employees were open to remaining within the field of higher education. Research on the impact of supervision (Boehman, 2007; Davis & Cooper, 2017; Perez & Haley, 2021) suggests that interventions by supervisors and institutions may be both worthwhile and effective in supporting staff satisfaction. Yet, the pandemic is not alone in shifting the field of student affairs. The external environment, including social, political, and cultural elements, increasingly impacts higher education in a myriad of ways.

The External Environment

Socio-political issues have caused distress for employees as well as challenges for institutions (Smith, 2020). Higher education is increasingly in the line of sight of politicians:

issues previously managed within the halls of higher education are frequently becoming ammunition to fulfill the political agendas of those within the halls of state legislatures and Congress (Knott, 2024; *Political Interference in Higher Ed*, n.d.; Shrecker, 2022). For instance, the politicization of diversity-related issues in higher education has impacted recruitment, retention, and satisfaction of faculty, staff, and administrators beyond the well-known public debates around academic freedom in the classroom. In early 2023, state legislation involving diversity, equity, and inclusion structures in student affairs caused many professionals to feel both "disheartened and also recommitted to our collective purpose to fulfill the purpose of higher education" (*Anti-DEI Legislation: Resources for Student Affairs Professionals*, para. 1). Negative rhetoric about DEI in higher education, coupled with intense scrutiny of universities' reactions to global political incidents, is deterring many student affairs professionals from aspiring to upper-level administrative positions. Moreover, the social reckoning triggered by George Floyd's murder brought critical issues of race, police brutality, and systemic racism to the forefront, profoundly affecting professionals of color.

Recruitment, Retention, and Resignation in an Increasingly Multigenerational Workforce

The current and pending demographic shifts impacting both student enrollment and employees at higher education institutions show up beyond race, ethnicity, and gender. A larger span of ages represented in the workforce, ranging four generational cohorts, has added an element of diversity to the workplace that is intensified by the current climate in student affairs. Aging is inevitable and coincides with changing dynamics in the social structures of families, communities, and the workforce. America's workforce has transformed over recent decades: the father-figure breadwinner and mother-figure caregiver structure (Kuykendall & Smith, 2017) has shifted. Today's workers change roles more frequently. The higher education workforce is aging

overall (Pritchard et al., 2019). Beyond societal changes, an aging workforce in higher education brings new factors that require attention. Retirement trends have shifted with increases in unanticipated retirements immediately following the onset of COVID-19 (Casselman, 2023). The impact of early retirement, especially for more senior-level roles has downstream consequences in a volatile employment climate that also saw younger employees leaving the field during the Great Resignation (Fry, 2021). Other employees on track to retire, such as professionals experiencing personal financial volatility, decided to stay in the workforce later than expected (Fry, 2021). It remains to be seen whether these retirement trends will continue; post-pandemic labor force trends are projected to be responsive to the aging workforce as well as changing market needs for an aging population (Dubina et al., 2021).

The shifts noted above have left the pipelines for younger and mid-level professionals in flux (Casselman, 2023). In some cases, these professionals are moving into more senior roles with less experience than in the past. In other cases where employees are working longer, the pipelines to more senior roles are unavailable. These circumstances can alter younger professionals' career trajectories. Further, the notion that all professionals are seeking more senior leadership positions may not always hold (Wong, 2023).

Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z – in today's increasingly interconnected workforce, have created unique intergenerational dynamics that student affairs professionals must address. It is critical to consider how student affairs professionals seek and support new talent. Chun and Evans (2020) forecast that, in a

climate of economic uncertainty and public questioning of the value of higher education's mission, it is incumbent upon colleges and universities to strengthen their talent practices

and to draw upon the contributions of different generational cohorts in the academic

workforce. (p. 1)

Many employers continue to rely on traditional motivators to attract and retain employees (Smet

et al., 2022). These drivers include various forms of compensation, titles, and advancement

opportunities. Smet et al. (2022) stated that these factors are still appealing to a large portion of

the workforce known as "traditionalists"; however, the pandemic has led more people to

reevaluate what they are looking for in their jobs and their lives (Clancy & Gubbala, 2021).

Leaning into the diversity of age and generational cohort identity in the workforce may be an

approach to rebuilding the student affairs profession, reflecting current and future realities of

student affairs, employees' needs, and workers' motivations.

Higher education as an institution is rooted in tradition and tends to be rigid and slow to

change (Clark et al., 2023; Dua et al., 2020). NASPA (2022) articulated a critical need to be

responsive to change in a report on the future of the student affairs profession:

Achieving an ideal future for student affairs will hinge on the profession's responsiveness

to enduring and emerging challenges, anticipated trends, and opportunities for

innovation. In the next 5 to 10 years, student affairs will need to prioritize efforts to

reaffirm long-standing values and reimagine how to apply them in new contexts. (p. 25)

Reaffirming core values in student affairs while reimagining those values in new contexts

represents the kinds of tensions administrators will need to address.

The Way We Work: Survey Says…

Gaps continue to exist between what institutions are looking for in candidates and what

employees have to offer (Deloitte, 2021). Similarly, gaps exist between what employees want

and what institutions are offering related to the work environment in higher education. In terms

of work modality, CUPA-HR survey responses summarized this concept as the "two-thirds rule" where "two-thirds of higher ed employees believe most of their duties can be performed remotely and two-thirds would prefer hybrid or remote work arrangements, yet two-thirds are compelled to work mostly or completely on-site" (Bichsel et al., 2023, para. 15). The misalignment between actual and ideal work conditions was identified as a predictor of an employee likely looking for new work in the near future (Bichsel et al., 2022).

Despite increased attention to issues of retention in higher education, common retention incentives (regular verbal recognition for doing good work and pay increases) were only received by 59% and 53% of participants, respectively in the 2023 administration of the *Higher Education Employee Retention Survey* (Bichsel et al., 2023), which was the highest of all incentives surveyed. These results suggest that other elements or motivators may warrant consideration, such as the impact of meaningful work relationships—including those with supervisors.

The Power and Promise of Effective Supervision

Effective supervision is an organizational imperative: supervisors represent administrative decision-making and support frontline implementation for institutional effectiveness (Green & Davis, 2021). Research suggests the supervisory relationship is a key indicator of staff socialization and satisfaction in the field (Boehman, 2007; Davis & Cooper, 2017; Perez & Haley, 2021). Considering employment trends, employee satisfaction, and work outcomes in student affairs, there is a need to understand how supervisors make sense of their roles and their influence as managers.

While there are bodies of literature on leadership and supervisory styles (Brown et al., 2020; Kouzes & Posner, 2019; Rath & Conchie, 2008; Wilson et al., 2020), there is a lack of

training and preparation in skills to be a supervisor within the challenging context and climate of structural, cultural, and political realities (Green & Davis, 2021; Tull et al., 2009). Furthermore, there is a lack of consensus around what quality supervision looks like or a standard approach to its application (Green & Davis, 2021). Current challenges for supervisors include filling empty positions, maintaining staff morale, managing staff workload, and retaining existing staff (Bichsel et al., 2023). This gap in intentional and coordinated training, preparation, and understanding leaves the responsibility of providing quality supervision to individual supervisors. An absence of effective strategies to support positive employee outcomes often leads to individual and organizational ramifications, including staff attrition (Green & Davis, 2021). Understanding today's supervisors' capabilities and needs is essential to maximize supervisors' impact in the future.

Purpose and Research Questions

The previous section highlighted concerning trends within student affairs employment, including issues of burnout, inadequate support systems, and a lack of preparation among supervisors to meet changing workplace demands. Although research has addressed general leadership and supervisory practices, a significant knowledge gap exists regarding how AVPs make sense of their supervisory role and influence in the complex environments they must navigate. In particular, gaining insight into the internal meaning-making processes employed by AVPs is essential. These processes involve synthesizing external trends and data to inform their approach to supervising and supporting personnel satisfaction.

Supervision, as defined below, focuses on the support of both individuals and institutional priorities:

Supervision in higher education is a management function intended to promote the

achievement of institutional goals and to enhance the personal and professional

capabilities and performance of staff. Supervision interprets the institutional mission and

focuses human and fiscal resources on the promotion of individual and organizational

competence. (Winston & Creamer, 1997, p. 186)

As a profession, student affairs needs to rethink how it both prepares and supports supervisors as

they navigate the changing culture of higher education. The talent pipelines and candidate pools

feeding student affairs are contracting. Departments are seeing rapid turnover and professional

"lifers" in the field are now few and far between. These departures leave a gap in historical

perspective and skill transfer. Students and young professionals are molded by generational and

institutional norms presented by their master's programs, faculty, staff, administrators,

supervisors, and colleagues (Chun & Evans, 2021; Tull et al., 2009). Norms are now in flux as

professionals at all stages of life are reframing what employment and leadership in higher

education should look and feel like throughout their careers.

Bettencourt et al. (2022) argued that it was insufficient to promote self-care as a response

to the challenging experiences in student affairs during the pandemic. They highlighted the

inadequacy of such measures in addressing "structural exploitation within organizational and

professional norms," which prioritized student support over practitioners' personal well-being (p.

3). A new mindset and strategy is necessary. A supportive work environment leads to better

outcomes for employees, including affective attachment to an organization (Boehman, 2007).

Effective supervisory relationships are critical to supporting these new strategies to reduce

turnover due to burnout and stress (Mullen et al., 2018) and result in positive outcomes in

retention and satisfaction in student affairs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how AVP-level administrators in student affairs make sense of their roles as supervisors within the current climate of higher education and employment, specifically through a process called sensemaking. In brief, "sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). The practice entails "authoring as well as reading" (Weick, 1995, p. 7) and is presented in contrast to interpretation which is defined as one word explaining another. Sensemaking is less about discovery and more about invention (Weick, 1995). It is a useful tool with which to consider supervision in student affairs, especially during times that require curiosity and creativity to support positive outcomes for staff and the profession overall.

The application of a sensemaking framework is appropriate, as "explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). The state of student affairs is at a crossroads following the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. A shifting relationship with the public's perception of the value of higher education coupled with increased political polarization represents uncharted territory. These issues have also presented a new cultural and contextual lens that supervisors must address.

AVP-level administrators are defined as assistant or associate vice presidents of student affairs or those in the #2 position to the senior student affairs officer (SSAO) at their institutions. Titles may include dean or assistant vice chancellor as well. I aimed to understand their roles as supervisors alongside the structures, culture, and systems within which they work and how they might be more effective in supporting staff in student affairs. Boehman (2007) suggested that

"supervisors, directors, and senior administrators play an important role in the development of increased organizational commitment" (p. 320). Commitment to an institution is a key indicator of positive employment outcomes (Jans, 1989). Commitment is related to the cultural and structural norms of an organization which supervisors need to consider in their roles. More precisely, "the symbols, metaphors, and deeply patterned behaviors that make up an organization's culture have a direct influence on the perceptions that individuals have about the organization they belong to" (Boehman, 2007, p. 320). This influence connects to the ultimate goals of this study: to identify how leaders can prepare for changes in employment trends and transitions; and to influence and support positive employment outcomes and employee satisfaction within their departments.

The AVP can be one of "the best and the most challenging roles in the modern division of student affairs" with both the ability to innovate and lead while also having to manage complex challenges of supervision and constrained resources (Hecht & Pina, 2016, p. ix). I hope that challenge and innovation in this population of leaders can unite to transform student affairs employment and employee satisfaction for the betterment of the field.

Research Questions

The following two research questions guide this study:

1. How do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of employment data and trends to inform their supervisory practice? [SENSEMAKING OF EXTERNAL INPUTS/TRENDS]

2. How do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of their role (relationship + actions) in supporting staff members beyond university-wide HR efforts? [SENSEMAKING OF SELF and INTERNAL]

Literature Review

To understand the integration of supervision in the field of student affairs within the context of a broader society, it is important to frame the problem within the current state of employment in student affairs, including trends impacting the field. My literature review centers on a framework that connects sensemaking and organizational frames. It delves into two primary areas: considerations related to supervising an increasingly multigenerational workforce and exploration of employment and societal trends that significantly influence the experiences, satisfaction, and outcomes of student affairs staff.

Sensemaking and Organizational Frames

To connect these wide-ranging yet coexisting topics my framework is rooted in Weick's (1995) work on sensemaking and Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four-Frame Model exploring organizational leadership. Sensemaking is a theory that explains how people make sense of complex situations. The model specifically considers how individuals frame and structure areas of uncertainty or variability. Organizational sensemaking concerns how something comes to be an event to a group. Three questions are especially pertinent: 1) "What does an event mean?", 2) "What's the story here?", and 3) "Now what should I do?" This third question has the power to bring meaning into existence; that is, the intent for the group will be "stable enough for them to act into the future" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410). Meaning-making leading to action is essential.

Weick et al. (2005) highlighted that "a central theme in both organizing and sensemaking is that people organize to make sense of equivocal inputs and enact this sense back into the world to make that world more orderly" (p. 410). The desire for sense and order translates to the praxis of supervision in general: with supervisors being the recipients of information and experiences to

organize, filter, analyze, synthesize, and compute to respond and shape their world through their actions with direct reports, institutions, and work tasks.

As shown in Table 1, Weick's (1995) model of sensemaking includes seven properties: "1) grounded in identity construction, 2) retrospection, 3) enacted of sensible environments, 4) social, 5) ongoing, 6) focused on and by extracted cues, and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (page 17). Table 1 explains each property's role in the sensemaking process. While all properties are relevant, the three most applicable to my study include a focus on identity, retrospection, and enactment.

Table 1

Table 1

Weick's (1995) Properties of Sensemaking

Property	Explanation
Grounded in identity construction	Sensemaking is shaped by people's identities and their perceptions of themselves within different contexts.
Retrospection	People make sense of the past in ways that can explain the present. People use past experiences and knowledge to interpret and make sense of present-day situations.
Enactment	People make sense of environments through action. People construct their reality through interpreting actions.
Social	Sensemaking is a constructed and shared endeavor that relies on interactions of people to develop shared understandings.
Ongoing	Sensemaking is iterative. New learning leads to new understanding and refinement of meaning.
Focused on and by extracted cues	Sensemaking is influenced by past experiences and socialization.

Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy	Sensemaking is meant to reduce uncertainty through plausible meaning-making being valued over being correct.

Grounded in Identity Construction

A core property of the sensemaking model is its root in identity. The AVP, as a supervisor, is the central figure of exploration in this study; it is important to recognize elements of their identity that may impact their work. Davis and Cooper (2017) found that supervisors' backgrounds were central to their ways of interacting with new professionals to influence socialization. Inherent in supervision is a relationship between two or more people in a shared context. Both participants in the supervisory relationship are sensemaking and are considering many of the same inputs from their frames of reference and influence. Their professional and personal identities impact their sensemaking.

Degn's (2015) work on sensemaking with academic department heads found that faculty members are both making and producing sense. Essentially, department heads author their reality and then project that reality onto their organizations. In other words, "who they think they are affects how they act as managers" (Degn, 2015, p. 1183). Department heads' interpretations of the external environment affect who they are and how they act, which ultimately influences outcomes for their direct reports and areas of responsibility. Degn's (2015) work on how department heads construct their identity supports Weick's (1995) proposition that sensemaking involves identity construction and that "...people learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences" (p. 23).

Weick (1995) talked about sensemaking as being in the "service of maintaining a positive self-conception" (p. 23), which underscores how supervisors may wish to justify why and how

they choose to act. Making sense of the world and how one behaves as a supervisor may serve to validate one's identity and authority in a role. Brown et al. (2008) asserted that professionals' sensemaking can vary, as each person has their own identity narrative to protect. Brown et al. (2008) proposed that sensemaking "occurs in the context of individuals' idiosyncratic efforts at identity construction" (p. 1035). Meanwhile, the literature has generally overlooked why people may differ in their interpretations and values of shared experiences (Brown et al., 2008).

The supervisory relationship, made up of multiple perspectives, makes an exploration of sensemaking useful. Professionals may be motivated by how they hope to be viewed in different environments. Brown et al. (2008) referred to this phenomenon as being the protagonist in one's own story; supervisors engage in a kind of identity work by "constructing versions of themselves both for their benefit and ours" (p. 1042). Factors that can influence an AVP's identity presentation may be based on prior experiences.

An important element of identity construction addressed in the literature is the need to consider racial identity between supervisors and employees. McCallum et al. (2023) addressed identity construction, stating there is a need for consistent reflection on a supervisor's own identities and the impacts of those identities on their supervisory relationships. Reflection on identity—both of oneself and others—is even more critical when addressing issues of race and ethnicity. Context and culture are key, especially as the external environment affects institutions and individual employees. McCallum et al. (2023) also argued that "supervisors and supervisees of diverse backgrounds cannot compartmentalize their identities to move forward with work as if nothing happened when heinous acts are done to people of color" (p. 9). The inclusive supervision model (McCallum et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2020) acknowledges the need to pay attention to identity within the supervisory relationship; creating a space for individuals to feel

safe, and an environment where you can be comfortable feeling uncomfortable. Looking at identity as well as how experiences may impact identity connects to Weick's (1995) property of retrospection.

Retrospection

A key component of sensemaking involves learning from the past, defined as retrospection under Weick's properties. Considering the retrospective nature of sensemaking, Weick et al. (2005) contended that symptoms of an issue are not discovered at a specific time. Instead, an issue is created when one reflects on the past and uncovers patterns. COVID-19 may have been the breaking point to expose stressors impacting professionals in student affairs, however, previously existing red flags, warning signs, and the severity of tensions within the field may have continued to go unnoticed without a retrospective view.

Specific actions and approaches of supervisors impact an overall supervisory style over time. The values a supervisor holds and the choices they make have consequences within their spheres of influence. Yet a supervisor cannot fully know what they are facing until they confront it and then look back to process what happened (Weick, 1988; Weick et al., 2005). Parts of what one discovers retrospectively are consequences of one's own sensemaking (Weick, 1988; Weick et al., 2005). This changes slightly when there are multiple perspectives to consider. The individual nature of interpreting a shared storyline connects to how different people may have a shared story but distinct outcomes upon retrospection. Brown et al. (2008) suggested that "a basic shared storyline may be appropriated, modified, and embellished by individuals to make idiosyncratic sense, retrospectively, of equivocal actions and outcomes" (p. 1052). Specific to the supervisory relationship, Wilson et al. (2020) discussed how individuals make meaning by

reflecting upon their own experiences; doing so helps people understand the importance of supervision.

Enactment

The third property of Weick's (1995) model supporting sensemaking in supervision is enactment. The term enactment represents the idea that "when people act, they bring events and structures into existence and set them in motion" (Weick, 1998, page 306). People who act often produce structures, constraints, and opportunities that were not there before they took action (Weick, 1988). Making sense of what produces action is at the core of enactment; "that cognition lies in the path of the action" (Weick, 1988, p. 307). In Weick's (1988) work specific to sensemaking in crisis, "initial responses do more than set the tone; they determine the trajectory of the crisis" (p. 309). The connection between thoughts and actions in supervision is relevant to the sensemaking process that impacts what may come next in a situation, crisis or not. Student affairs professionals are often tagged to manage student and campus crises. Exploring the property of enactment makes sense given the role and responsibilities of AVPs in student affairs.

Enactment in sensemaking involves action and then responses to that initial action (Weick, 1988). Action by supervisors and what is propelled into motion in the relationship with their employees can represent, as Weick suggests, a second stimulus of partial human construction. The stimuli propel sensemaking into the relationship as a synergistic exercise and also continues to inform how supervisors supervise over time, whether with the same employee or within the same or similar context in the future.

Framework

My framework to explore sensemaking places the AVP and employee in the middle, using the supervisory relationship as the primary source of inquiry. How a supervisor makes

sense of the world around them impacts their supervisory approach. There are four external

dimensions of the model: trends, HR and institutional policies, institutional priorities, and the

socio-political landscape. These dimensions influence the model in two ways. First, on a macro

level, they affect the field of higher education and specific institutions. Second, these dimensions

directly impact individuals, both the AVP supervisor and their staff. Sensemaking is an

appropriate action-oriented process with which to explore supervisory interaction; it enables the

examination of how participants confront or bring different issues or dimensions into existence.

It also addresses what participants themselves will do with these dimensions, which is essentially

meaning-making (Weick et al., 2005).

  As shown in Figure 1, trends, HR and institutional policy, institutional priorities, and the

socio-political landscape impact supervisors and employees from an external perspective. These

dimensions can be synthesized in the supervisory relationship in the middle. Sensemaking is a

useful framework to explore the supervisory relationship in student affairs because of the

personal and highly impactful interactions AVP-level administrators can have with their direct

reports. Those who subscribe to a model of sensemaking believe there is much to offer in

organizational life, from subtle (e.g., relational) matters to more substantive ones: "To work with

the idea of sensemaking is to appreciate that smallness does not equate with insignificance.

Small structures and short moments can have large consequences" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410).

The interaction between the supervisor and the employee is the space where sensemaking may

occur and where subtle opportunities for improved outcomes may exist.

  I investigated AVP-level administrators' sensemaking due to the role's far-reaching

potential to impact and enhance student affairs professionals' satisfaction and outcomes at all

levels. NASPA has dedicated resources and research in support of the AVP cohort of

professionals, acknowledging how an investment in this population is uniquely suited to facilitate the development and growth of professionals in this field (Hecht & Pina, 2016). Degn (2015) noted, "It is inherent in the very concept of management, that managers have some influence on their employees…In the sensemaking perspective however, the relation between manager and employee can also be seen as a sensegiving/sensemaking relation…the manager sensegives while sensemaking" (p. 1191). Degn's work recognizes significant differences in how this plays out, with the synergistic relationship providing a laboratory for learning how meaning, action, and impact work together in student affairs supervision and outcomes.

Figure 1

Sensemaking through Supervision Framework
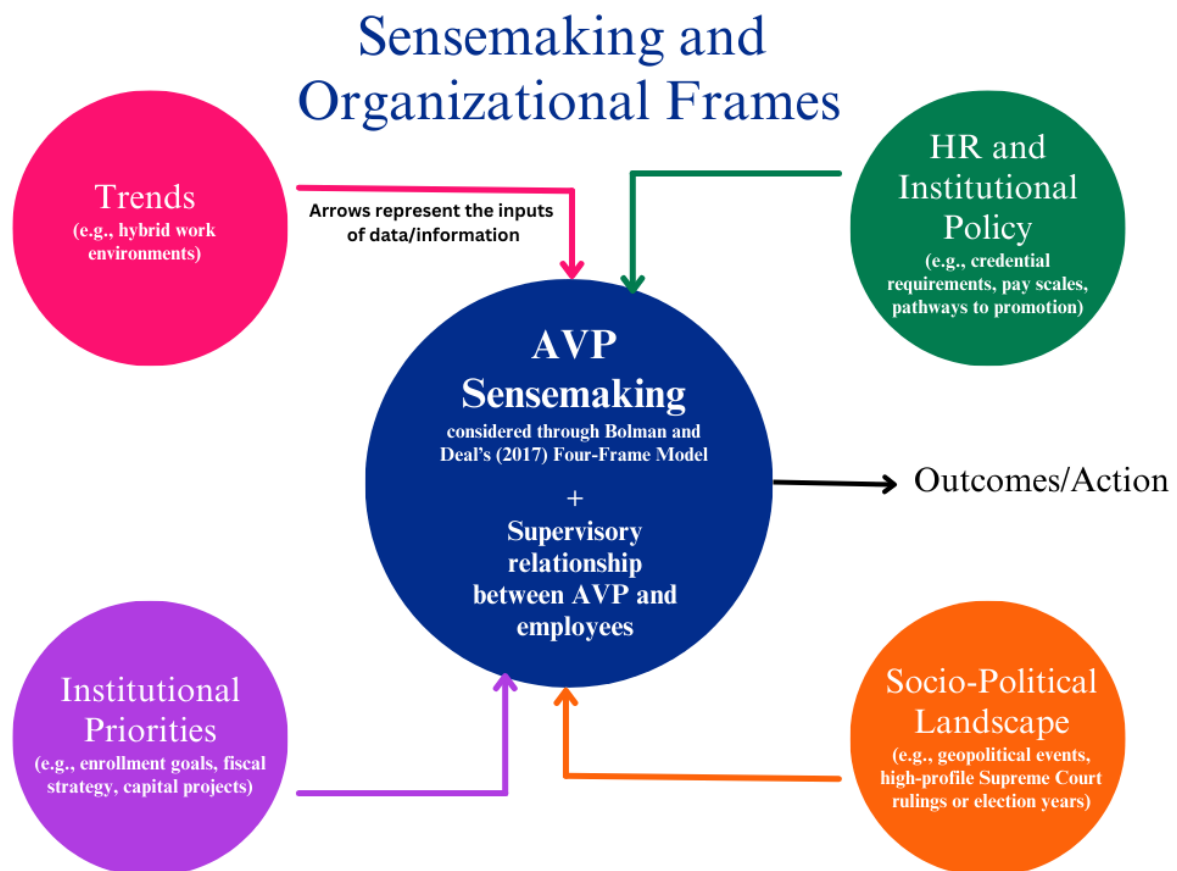
Limitations and Critiques of Sensemaking Models

The mainstream literature has centered on Weick's (1995) view of sensemaking as focused on collective meaning and coordinated action resulting from assumptions that meaning is shared (Brown et al., 2008). Brown et al. (2008) nonetheless suggested that discrepant narratives can exist within individual sensemaking. Although people may have a shared narrative, frame, and agreement on many details of an experience, they might hold divergent views of many elements of a shared experience (Brown et al., 2008). These incongruencies make sense given that "sensemaking occurs in the service of maintaining a positive self-conception" (Weick, 1995, p. 18).

In service of maintaining a positive self-conception, sensemaking can also be skewed when a leader refuses to see past their blind spots. Weick (1988) addressed this concern directly, noting that once a person is committed to an action and builds a justification to support that action, the explanation transforms into an assumption that may be taken for granted. It is critical to investigate any bias that may be present when considering role, identity, and action related to a sensemaking framework.

The retrospective nature of sensemaking also requires vigilant analysis. Hindsight is 20/20 and people often have a natural tendency to filter, edit, re-sort, and re-sequence events to meet their personal agenda. Brown et al.'s (2008) work on sensemaking narratives illustrates that much sense is shared and suggests "that organizational actors have considerable latitude, and are strategically motivated, to determine their own highly personal interpretations of what has occurred" (p. 1052). To provide an opportunity to address these limitations and expose multiple perspectives, my framework also includes a model to consider different organizational frames.

Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model

My framework recognizes that organizational decision-making can be understood using multiple organizational perspectives. Using Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four-Frame Model to consider Weick et al's (2005) questions about meaning-making leading to action can illuminate multiple perspectives common in complex organizations, such as higher education institutions. The Four-Frame Model provides a way to organize variables within the sensemaking framework given the complex nature of employment in student affairs. A frame is "a mental model—a set of ideas and assumptions—that you carry in your head to help you understand and negotiate a particular 'territory'" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 12). The ability of supervisors to reframe the experiences, trends, and environments within their student affairs and higher education space can be viewed as a vehicle of sensemaking from both the macro and individual perspectives of my framework. This reframing is represented in the middle circle of the Sensemaking through Supervision Framework (see Figure 1). Bolman and Deal's (2017) model includes four frames as summarized in Table 2: structural, symbolic, political, and human resources.

Degn's (2015) work on identity construction and sensemaking in higher education proposed sensemaking as a method of analysis. This approach emphasizes both the "authoring actor" and their associated cognitive elements alongside organizational rules, routines, and actions of the sensemaker (Degn, 2015, p. 1183). Rules, routines, and actions can be considered within the context of Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four Frames. Bolman and Deal's analysis showed how structural demands, institutional scripts and values, and personal cognitive frames result in distinct identity dilemmas for department heads (Degn, 2015).

Table 2

Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four-Frame Model and Higher Education Employment Trends

Frame	Description	Dimensions	Connection to Higher Education and Employment Trends
Structural	Social landscape	Rules, policies, procedures, allocation of labor, systems, hierarchy-organizational charts, technology, environment	Credential requirements in hiring Hiring practices Virtual/remote work policies
Symbolic	Inspirational elements	Culture, myth, meaning, rituals and ceremonies, stories, "heroes" or significant figures	Traditional ways of hiring Professional association Pathways to the profession
Political	Advocacy	Power conflict, competition, politics, influence	Scarce resources Promotion
Human Resources	Empowerment of community and individuals	Needs, skills, relationships, prejudice,	Care for employees (e.g., mental health effects of COVID-19) Expectations and roles of supervisors Mentor Culture of employee interactions and support

The belief that an AVP's role is to enact change is key to understanding how connecting trends and other inputs through effective supervision can lead to positive interventions in student affairs employment. Weick (1988) spoke of believing in people's capacity to intervene. He pointed out that capacity makes a difference in allowing people to see more ways in which their interventions can foster change. Making sense of trends plus meaningful interventions by supervisors can result in positive outcomes.

An Increasingly Multigenerational Workforce

It is critical to explore elements that reflect how an increasingly multigenerational workforce, along with employment trends in and outside of higher education, connect in the supervisory relationship. Tull et al. (2009) cited six main dimensions that have consistently emerged in the higher education literature as most important for an administrator's work life: career support, recognition of competence, interdepartmental relations, external relations, working conditions, and perceptions of discrimination. These dimensions have been shown to influence the quality of work life and retention. All remain relevant despite new generations of workers entering the workforce—a workforce built upon dated worker norms that are yet to reflect the rapid social and technological growth within higher education and changing preferences for work style and communication (Deloitte, 2021).

Demographic identifiers such as gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and age, are often used to analyze individual and group dynamics. Generational identity is unique in that it is socially constructed and has seldom been widely studied concerning higher education employment. Similar to other identifiers, a generational identity is "a social creation rather than a biological necessity" (Sessa et al., 2007, p. 49); in other words, one cannot quickly generalize a group based on the experiences of some. Limitations exist in that as researchers and society tend to delineate a set of years to a generational cohort, in truth, "each generation is infinitely more complex than any single profile can reveal" (Berk, 2013, p. 12). Berk (2013) nevertheless claimed that it is valid "to suggest a set of characteristics and cultural trends derived from sound scientific research that can provide insight on value and expectations and guide the workplace practices for administrators" (p. 12). These characteristics are helpful when considering the

challenges in student affairs and employment trends that seem to defy traditional life-stage analysis.

Overview of Generational Cohorts

Defining generations as distinct cohorts is a social construction (Mannheim, 1952). Moore and Krause (2021) explained that "birth cohorts give individuals a common range of experiences that bring out certain characteristics and prepare them for action relevant to their historical period" (p. 3). Regarding generational cohorts and identity, Ryder (1965) referred to the impact of time, a specific heritage, or participating in a "slice of life" that is unique from others (p. 844). Sessa et al. (2007) supported Ryder's claim in explaining that inclusion in an age-group cohort

> endows individuals within it with a common location in the social and historical process and thereby limits them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them to a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience and a characteristic type of historically relevant action. (p. 49)

Lyons and Kuron (2014) synthesized Ryder's (1965) work viewing generations as cohorts, implying "that they have concrete boundaries corresponding to a set of birth years, are homogeneous enough to be meaningful and have observable commonalities that are relatively fixed and measurable" (p. S141). Chun and Evans (2021), however, cautioned that no consensus has been reached on when a generation starts and ends; generational cohorts are simply assigned a range or cycle of birth years of about 20 years.

The concepts of generational identity and age are often intertwined. Even so, generational status assumes a relatively neutral view of cohort differences without the assumptions that might accompany a specific age (Chun & Evans, 2021). Considering how assumptions of a group

impact stereotypes, and how generational cohorts are perceived, treated, and act in society, research suggests that the common location in a social or historical process provides some observable commonalities that may predispose cohort members to certain characteristics of thought or action (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Moore & Krause., 2021; Sessa et al., 2007). Research does caution about limitations in generational cohort research as "common research methodologies used to study generations cannot unambiguously identify the unique effects of generations from other time-bound sources of variation (i.e., chronological age and contemporaneous period effects)" (Rudolph et al., 2020, p. 946). Additionally, much research relies on a narrow demographic (i.e., white, middle class, educated) (Henrich et al., 2010). Challenges associated with worker norms, as well as a commitment to employment explored later in this chapter, connect to the diversity of needs supervisors must navigate to support an increasingly multigenerational workforce.

Implications of a Multigenerational Workforce in Higher Education

Administrators, faculty, and staff in higher education engage in work that is characterized by an interdependence related to a "variety of tasks, including intellectually complex work, within a dynamic system" (Kleinhans et al., 2015, p. 93). The wide age and generational range between administrators across functional areas of a higher education institution (deans, provosts, administrative assistants, teaching assistants, and students) changes the interpersonal dynamics in an academic work environment (Berk, 2013).

While generational identity is not new, a lack of a unifying theory and clear research related to generational membership may constrain academic practitioners in applying generational research in different areas of the higher education workplace (Chun & Evans, 2021). Kleinhans et al., (2015) asserted that "the focus of most studies examining these

generational categorizations has been on describing each cohort in the context of the historical events that shaped them" (p. 90). They also underlined the "impact of the coexistence of these generations in the workplace, especially in challenging interpersonal work environments such as academe" (p. 91). Four generational cohorts are currently represented in the higher education workforce. It is important to understand the professionals' unique lived experiences based on their perceived or real generational identity. The implications of life stages on a professional's relationship with their role and institution, as well as how the shared experience of a global pandemic shaped their career plans is a key challenge facing supervisors.

How generational cohorts as social constructs are understood "raises questions about the conditions under which individuals enact generational stereotypes in their expectations for self and others" (Moore & Krause, 2021, p. 2). Assumptions and stereotypes about and within generations are brought into the workplace. Many employees in higher education remain employed later in life, whether due to better healthcare or declining retirement savings. The increased age and generational diversity affect the interpersonal nature of the academic work environment and how higher education professionals need to think about generations' coexistence in the workplace (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011.; Kleinhans et al., 2015).

Supervisors need to expand their understanding of the dynamic nature of generational identity, whether someone identifies as a member or is externally placed into a perceived cohort. Kleinhans et al. (2015) pointed out that many people who are working later in life constitute most of the senior-level positions in today's workforce. Recognizing that individuals in senior leadership roles have positionality to influence those in lower positions, Arsenault (2004) suggested that leaders need to be sensitive to generational differences: many styles and programs focused on more veteran or Baby Boomer leadership preferences. Rossem (2019) described

cohort interaction, suggesting distinct effects from similarity/dissimilarity; for instance,

individuals in a particular generational group are more likely to exchange positive sentiments

and engage in constructive communication with their cohort versus across generational groups.

Moore and Krause (2021) found that people generally preferred spending more time with

colleagues perceived to be from the same generational cohort and experienced negative effects

from spending more time with colleagues perceived to be from different generational cohorts.

These inclinations pose additional managerial and socialization challenges in student affairs.

Organizations must understand and capitalize on the strengths of each generation to

achieve success (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Traditional employment trajectories are no longer

reliable for staff planning in student affairs. Supervisors need to be proactive in their approach to

supervision and departmental and divisional recruitment and retention strategies.

The Three Rs: Recruitment, Retention, and Resignation

Exploring the movement of professionals into, through, and out of their roles (and student

affairs overall) is paramount when aspiring to successful outcomes in student affairs. AVPs have

a particularly acute role in supporting these areas as they can engage at both institutional and

individual levels. Recruitment into student affairs roles is seeing a fundamental mismatch

between institutions' "demand for talent and the number of workers willing to supply it" (Smet et

al., 2022). The pipeline to the profession is shrinking; meanwhile, anticipated and unanticipated

resignations have also affected retention. The 2022 and 2023 *CUPA-HR Higher Education*

Employee Retention Surveys included a tool to understand how recruitment and retention could

be improved and to learn about factors underlying the retention crisis immediately following the

COVID-19 pandemic (Bichsel et al., 2023). Key findings from the survey suggested that

retention is problematic. Professionals at risk for leaving cited issues related to being

overworked, underpaid, and not having flexible work arrangements (Bichsel et al., 2023). Yet

not all areas of colleges and universities are feeling these effects in the same way: "The area with

the most acute retention challenge is student affairs, where 39% of employees surveyed say they

are likely or very likely to look for other employment opportunities within the next year"

(Bichsel et al., 2023, para. 8).

   Bichsel et al. (2023) noted that while retention was a concern for institutions, many

employees were not necessarily looking to leave the field overall, indicating that appropriate

retention measures could be successful. CUPA-HR survey results also highlighted the impact of

competition within and outside of higher education stating that

> a good proxy for retention is the likelihood of looking for other employment. Waiting to
>
> ask an employee why they are leaving during an exit interview is too late to implement
>
> incentives, and exit interviews provide little indication of the dissatisfaction that exists
>
> among remaining employees. (Bichsel et al., 2023, para 45)

   Findings from the 2023 survey reinforced those from the year prior that salary increases

remain a top motivator for higher education professionals to seek new work opportunities

(Bichsel et al., 2023). Employees reported "profound disagreement" regarding being paid fairly,

with 53% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they were justly paid (Bichsel

et al., 2023). Notably, this proportion increased by 7% compared with responses to the same

question in 2022 (Bichsel et al., 2022). Additionally, survey results found high levels of

dissatisfaction with the scope and availability of benefits that aligned with better work-life

balance (e.g., remote work policies, flexible scheduling, childcare benefits, and parental leave

policies).

Worker Norms in an Increasingly Multigenerational Student Affairs

Generational divides have led to conflicting workplace norms in higher education; institutions must adapt mindsets, policies, and support structures to meet the needs of an increasingly age-diverse workforce facing evolving post-pandemic expectations. Norms can exist in various ways in an organization and may be perceived differently by new professionals entering the field; norms are usually built into an institution's fabric and are hard to change.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion work on college campuses often explore ageism while lacking consideration of generational identity. Arsenault (2004) pointed to the failure to appreciate generational differences as prompting criticism over its relevance to the diversity dialogue. Chun and Evans (2021) found that "age-based inequality represents a powerful form of discrimination in the workplace that persists when reproduced in everyday interactions and crystallized in organizational structures and processes" (p. 19). Bridging generational divides is imperative in a dynamic, modern workforce. Kleinhans et al. (2015) urged higher education leaders to identify and mitigate generation-specific barriers ingrained in traditional engagement expectations and cultural norms, which threaten collaborative vitality across today's multidimensional workforce. Examples of discrepant worker norms include findings such as an imbalance between job demands and supervisor respect. Kleinhans et al. (2015) argued that "the imbalance was primarily defined by higher time demands and job-life conflicts and lower recognition and fairness" (p. 97). The survey found twice as many supervisors as non-supervisors in higher education "agree that it is normal to work weekends and that they cannot complete their job duties working only their institution's normal full-time hours" (Bichsel et al., 2023, p. 26).

Workplace culture may shape normative views of career progression, including hiring, tenure, promotion, and expected retirement age. Distinctions may exist, however, at the department or divisional level within a higher education institution (Chun & Evans, 2021). Institutional context also plays a major role in the intergenerational dynamics of an academic department or division; department leadership and other power structures may further influence whether and how ageist behaviors and actions occur (Chun & Evans, 2021).

Key topics influencing worker norms include supervising a changing multigenerational workforce in higher education (Chun & Evans, 2021; Fry, 2021), well-being and turnover intention (Inceoglu et al., 2018), ideal worker norms (Bettencourt et al., 2022), supervision as socialization (Perez & Haley, 2021), as well as employee validation (Ardoin et al., 2022). For instance, Ardoin et al. (2022) found that SSAOs need to validate the contributions of early career professionals to encourage increased retention in the field. These authors elaborated on the work of Marshall et al. (2016), which illuminated how satisfaction and attrition connect to supervision and work expectations.

Each generation appears subject to the same developmental processes as they age (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). However, age-based generational cohorts develop within their unique contextual location in history (Ryder, 1965). Considering the changing demographics of the higher education workforce, "the values of senior members of the workforce cannot be dismissed and the needs of younger employees beginning their academic careers cannot be ignored" (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011, p. 9). Higher education needs to abandon certain one-size-fits-all norms in supervision, management, and support structures to be more responsive to its increasingly diverse and multigenerational workforce and changing employee preferences. While recognizing and committing to training the workforce on the implications of generational identity

in a multigenerational interactive work environment is important, Kleinhans et al. (2015) state that "just as the academy has had to embrace issues brought on by increased racial and ethnic diversity on campuses, it must now sensitize itself to the varied work-life balance needs of the multigenerational workforce" (p. 100). Kleinhans et al. (2015) pinpointed the roles of administrators, faculty, and staff as the ones holding the responsibility to contribute in new and novel ways to meet the previously unexpected needs of their institutions. However, "any formula to achieve these unprecedented multifaceted outcomes will include significant time expenditure, energy, and effort" (p. 98). AVPs need to understand the generational dynamics of their employees to successfully meet and support the diverse needs of those with different perspectives. Norms and policies maintained within the hierarchical structures of higher education must respond to the perspectives and commitments of those in all stages of life.

The current shift in workforce demographics and increased intergenerational interactions at colleges and universities means that professional competency in engaging with intersecting identities in the workplace is crucial. While this is true, all working-aged professionals experienced the social and employment consequences of COVID-19 and what it has meant for the future of work norms in higher education. Supervisors will need to be equipped to navigate these nuances into the future.

Demographic Shifts Reshape the Student Affairs Landscape

This section will frame the current climate and context based on varied demographic data: student demographics (and implications); current and anticipated age/generational shifts in the workforce; trends related to school closures, declining enrollment in higher education student affairs master's programs, and the impact of changing requirements for jobs (Emerging Degree Reset, 2022).

Population and Demographic Shifts

Supervisors should not ignore understanding shifts in demographics as they aim to support their employees and pursue positive outcomes in their work overall. Kleinhans et al. (2015) contended there is value in understanding the generational composition of higher education institutions. This comprehension would aid in responding to the "unique needs of each generational cohort when planning ways to improve recruitment, retention, and productivity of administrators, faculty, and staff" (Kleinhans et al., 2015, p. 89). Beyond generational cohort identity, employment projections in civilian labor force population rates are trending downward between 2022-2032 (Dubina et al., 2022). The actual number of available workers will decrease as population shifts occur and older professionals leave the workforce. These decreases will not be felt equally, as high school graduation projections show declines in the northeast, mid-Atlantic, and mid-western United States, and changes that show less White and more Hispanic and Asian population (Seltzer, n.d.). College admission offices are already strategizing for these changes.

Commitment to the Work

Cultural trends shifting work norms alongside workforce demographic shifts may impact how committed student affairs professionals are to their institutions and roles. Boehman's (2007) study on affective commitment among student affairs professionals revealed that "organizational support, job satisfaction, and organizational politics contributed to variance in the affective commitment of student affairs professionals" (page 318). Among these factors, organizational support may be most valuable in predicting affective commitment (Boehman, 2007). These findings led to questions related to defining a supportive environment, especially as perceptions may differ across roles and individuals. This concept illuminated an implication for supervisors

in their approach to support and supervision: one must understand how their staff views the characteristics of a supportive environment to create a shared understanding. Put another way, "a supervisor's 'reality' of a supportive environment is irrelevant without a shared understanding of the staff" (Boehman, 2007, p. 319).

Reasons for organizational commitment need to be reevaluated (Boehman, 2007; Jans, 1989). Meyer & Parfyonova's (2010) work spoke about emotional attachment to an organization (affective), the reflection of costs associated with leaving an institution (continuance commitment), and normative commitment which reflects moral commitment or a sense of loyalty. These aspects have changed in the post-pandemic era of higher education and student affairs, which supports the need for research to look at ways to impact positive outcomes for employees through supervisory relationships.

Supervision as an Opportunity for Student Affairs

Marshall et al. (2016) indicated that job satisfaction for student affairs professionals was related to quality supervision. McCallum et al. (2023) illuminated the disconnect between the student affairs profession espousing a holistic approach to student development (i.e., recognizing the value of an approach where students feel safe and develop a sense of belonging) and failing to uphold this philosophical view with staff supervision. Supervision is not an innate practice. The curricula of student affairs graduate programs focus more on leadership development than supervisory skills. Many student affairs staff are later tasked with supervisory roles with minimal training (Williams & Anderson, 2021). Institutions and senior leaders should not assume professionals, including AVP-level administrators, are automatically prepared to navigate the complexities of supervision.

Research suggests that "leaders play a pivotal role in organizations and their behavior has a significant impact on the work behavior, performance, and well-being of their employees" (Inceoglu et al., 2018, p. 179). Boehman (2007) suggested that experiences with direct supervisors often translated to an employee's beliefs around an organization's level of support. Supervisors' styles and approaches in student affairs can hold critical value in supporting staff outcomes. McCallum et al. (2023) found that

> Supervisors agreed that creating a safe space is a foundational practice of inclusive supervision. It is where difficult conversations begin and where resolutions can be discussed. These difficult conversations can pertain to issues or concerns within the office or institution as well as in society at large, which may impact supervisees' sense of safety in that space. Supervisors…understand that for supervisees to best perform work responsibilities, they must have a space where they feel safe to express themselves and their opinions and where they generally feel a sense of care. (p. 8)

The impact of supervisors on those they supervise is critical, and the benefits of these relationships can be reciprocal. Bichsel et al. (2023) discovered that granting supervisors the power to advocate for their staff, including through resources, was an important motivator for these professionals' retention.

Conclusion

Leaders in higher education regularly discuss trends and problems with broad strokes, offering solutions at a systemic level to address dissatisfaction and negative outcomes in higher education employment. These claims, however, often identify symptoms rather than causes, yielding generic solutions that may lack buy-in at the appropriate levels or sufficient resources for effective implementation. Leaders must dedicate more time to consider the impact

supervisors have on their employees. The supervisory relationships that form teams,

departments, divisions, and professional networks are central to the work in higher education and

provide a prime space for investment. Unfortunately, student affairs has fallen victim to a

paralysis where traditional operational methods are not being adequately challenged to adapt to

today's higher education landscape and context. According to NASPA (2022), "Thirty-nine

percent of survey respondents report that their institution is not discussing or prioritizing changes

in the student affairs workforce" (p. 23). This finding indicates a stark gap in addressing critical

issues within the profession. Supervisors and institutions routinely find themselves being guided

by reactive practices instead of leveraging insights and trends to proactively address concerns

with their employees for a lasting impact. When the methods and strategies of the past are no

longer effective, flexibility and investment are imperative to move the field toward a brighter

future.

Chapter 2: Data-Driven Report and Analysis

Effective supervisory relationships are critical to positive outcomes in retention and satisfaction in student affairs. This study addressed the need to understand how student affairs administrators translate knowledge into action via supervisory relationships to improve employee satisfaction and outcomes. The two research questions explored AVP sensemaking of external trends and their sensemaking about their roles as supervisors.

Research Question 1: How do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of employment data and trends to inform their supervisory practice?

Research Question 2: How do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of their role (relationship + actions) in supporting staff members beyond university-wide HR efforts?

While research identifies trends and best practices in supervision, little is known about how and why individual leaders like AVPs apply this knowledge within their institutions. A significant knowledge gap exists regarding AVPs' sensemaking of higher education trends, employee satisfaction data, and their management strategies. This gap extends to their capacity or ability to implement appropriate and meaningful changes to improve employment outcomes through their supervisory approaches. This study aimed to clarify this knowledge-to-action space by examining how AVPs interpret data and experiences to inform tangible approaches in their leadership practice. The research focused specifically on how AVPs make sense of societal, institutional, and interpersonal trends to enact meaningful changes that benefit their employees, institutions, and the field of student affairs.

Significance

The significance of this work relates to how the field of student affairs might reimagine the current culture of supervision to consider supervisors as agents for positive change. By using data and information about trends, supervisors can respond to the current climate and context in student affairs and support employee satisfaction and outcomes. Considering the potential impact at the individual level, Boehman (2007) suggested that "practitioners also need to be aware of how the 'student affairs culture' influences individual commitment" (p. 321). McCallum et al. (2023) bridged the value of culture with a commitment to supervision:

> In student affairs, we often preach values of individualism through phrases such as self-care, self-development, and doing the self-work, but in doing so we devalue and deemphasize the critical role of the supervisor in developing and facilitating workplace culture that supports staff, develops professionals, and works towards the espoused and collective values of the profession. (p. 1)

Supervisory relationships exist at all levels of an organization in higher education and are ripe with the potential to influence employee satisfaction and commitment. Reflecting on how supervisors make sense of their roles and the contexts in which they work is critical as supervisory training and preparation throughout careers does not currently exist in a universally available way. Furthermore, while research on supervision in student affairs is not new, the majority of the literature focuses on the population of new professionals entering the field (Tull et al., 2009). This work will build upon the current literature focusing on how supervisors make sense of their role in supervising new and existing professionals.

Colleagues' experiences and the internal and external contexts of the profession represent the content needed to make sense of, act upon, and assess employment issues and satisfaction in student affairs. New or updated cultural norms in the field are needed that promote positive work

and nonwork outcomes (Boehman, 2007). Norms should include approaches that reflect the current and future needs of the profession and its people.

Many current trends will continue and new ones will emerge, therefore a proactive supervisory framework is necessary. Tull et al. (2009) professed that "when relatively new professionals leave the field, we lose not only the resources we have invested in them, but the ideas and innovations they might have contributed to the campus had they persisted" (p. x). This potential loss is now the case for professionals at all levels within student affairs. My research aims to illuminate how leaders navigate change in employment trends to be better equipped to support their employees. When supervisors have the tools and resources to support their teams, the power to advocate on their behalf, and receive appropriate management training, they, too, are less likely to seek other employment opportunities (Bicshel et al., 2023).

Positionality

My interest in this work originated from my extensive professional experience in student affairs, particularly as a supervisor. Throughout my professional career spanning 19 years, I have navigated supervisory relationships within diverse social, institutional, and cultural change contexts. I am a white cis-gendered, woman who is married with children, and my professional journey encompasses various roles in student affairs. The majority of my work has been centered on student activities, engagement, and leadership development. I have worked at a small private college, a regional public university, and a mid-sized religiously affiliated R1 university, all in Massachusetts.

My student affairs career trajectory started at the graduate assistant level. Following my master's degree, I held multiple roles ranging from new professional, mid-level, and now AVP/#2-level roles in student affairs. Recently, I served as the interim AVP for student

engagement at an elite R1 university for one year. I now serve as the special assistant for strategic initiatives in the Office of the Vice President of Student Affairs at the same institution.

Throughout this journey, I valued my own experiences with supervisors and mentors. These relationships sustained me through challenging times in the field, in our society, and personally. Over the years, I have advised, mentored, supervised, and managed individuals at various career stages, including undergraduates, graduate students, new professionals, mid-level professionals, and those transitioning to retirement. My curiosity in supervision focused on understanding supervisory relationships among different generational cohort identities in higher education, particularly in student affairs.

The advent of COVID-19, however, illuminated shifts in employment satisfaction and attrition in student affairs that were previously discussed by Marshall et al. (2016) before the pandemic. Consequently, my focus broadened to explore how supervisors can derive meaning from the trends and social implications impacting higher education and student affairs. This exploration centers on deliberate supervisory interactions with their employees, aiming to understand and address how the evolving landscape might affect the profession.

Data Collection and Analysis Approach

This study examined how AVP-level student affairs administrators applied sensemaking in their supervision as it related to employment and societal trends to improve employee satisfaction outcomes. My desire to approach this work from a sensemaking perspective is in line with the constructivist worldview, which suggests that "human beings construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Creswell, 2014, p. 38).

Fundamental to the constructivist worldview is the fact that humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their perspective—historical, social, and cultural (Creswell,

2014). As a qualitative researcher, I sought to understand the context and setting of my participants by gathering information from their personal experiences. To explore employment and societal trends, I positioned them within Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four-Frame Model of organizational leadership. This model allowed for a structure to consider themes and how they interacted with an institution.

A qualitative design allows for flexibility and integration, as the researcher can make connections throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). AVPs needed to be currently supervising in the post-COVID-19 environment of higher education. I specifically targeted AVPs at public and private 4-year institutions in the United States. For-profit institutions and 2-year institutions were excluded due to the increased number of unique variables they would introduce into the study. I explored the sensemaking process based on the relationship between AVPs and their employees (direct reports) as represented in the middle of my Sensemaking through Supervision Framework (see Figure 1). Investigating the interactions, sensemaking, and impact of AVPs informed the exploration of my research questions.

I relied primarily on interviews for my qualitative research method. For this study, I contemplated shifts in the student affairs profession and how supervisors may help to effect positive change. Through interviews, participants had the opportunity to reflect on their identities as supervisors, their growth and development over time, and the impact of their and others' actions. These facets are each aligned with a sensemaking approach. Participants' ability to share their understandings and experiences enabled the creation of new knowledge to shape more useful practices and strategies.

I chose AVPs as the role to explore within student affairs as this role oversees a variety of functional areas and types of employees (Hecht & Pina, 2016). Additionally, AVPs often

supervise those who supervise others. Using this population allowed me to uncover elements related to the impact of sensemaking in supervision on a large reach of professionals within student affairs. AVP-level professionals, for my study, supervised at least one functional area and had the supervision of staff as a part of their official portfolio. These eligibility criteria were important for engaging with supervision through a sensemaking lens as those at the AVP level tend to work with more complex organizational dynamics, within multiple frames (e.g., political, human resources, social/cultural, interpersonal) (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The organizational and leadership responsibilities at this level bridge individual, divisional, and institutional interactions (Hecht & Pina, 2016).

Recruitment Plan

An initial email call for participants introduced my research study and asked interested participants to complete a consent form before filling out a short questionnaire and scheduling a 45-minute Zoom interview. To recruit participants, I connected with my network of AVPs through the NASPA AVP-Institute and other AVP-specific communities through my professional connections as a member of NASPA. Additionally, participants were recruited through my professional network of student affairs professionals.

Sample

I utilized purposeful/convenience sampling (Terrell, 2023), soliciting participants from professional networks and associations to garner a diverse sample of AVPs of student affairs at US colleges and universities. The purposeful element of my sample related to my approach being nonrandom and selected based on defined inclusion criteria (Terrell, 2023). I first sent a recruitment email asking potential participants to consider participating if they felt they met the criteria of the study. I specifically targeted AVPs at 4-year public or private institutions who are

currently working in a supervisory capacity to explore how they are making sense of the shift in student affairs and higher education in the post-COVID-19 era.

My goal was to have a balanced sample of male- and female-identifying professionals' experiences in the workforce. In higher level positions and related to trends in employment, gender may impact men and women differently (e.g., childbearing, breadwinners). This possibility was important to address. Differences in age and the span of years of experience between AVPs and those they supervised were not a primary focus in recruitment, however, it is reflected in my data analysis.

The 10 participants in this study possessed diverse identities and experiences. Participants had an average of 19.25 years of experience in higher education, and an average of 6.75 years of experience at the AVP or #2 level. The 10-person sample comprised five female-identifying and five male-identifying professionals. All participants were working at colleges and universities in the United States and represented 10 institutions in nine states at the time of the data collection. Participants (see Table 3) represented a range of functional areas in student affairs, including conduct and case management, health and wellbeing, engagement, and residential life.

Table 3

Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Sex	Race/ Ethnicity	Functional Area/Perspective	Carnegie Classification of Institution Type	Years of Experience in Higher Education	Years of Experience as an AVP/#2
Lucy	Female	White	Associate Dean of Students	Private, 4-year, small, exclusively undergraduate	15–20 years	1–3 years
Carole	Female	White	Associate Vice	Public, 4-year,	15–20 years	11–14 years

			President for Student Affairs	large		
Frank	Male	White	Associate Vice President for Student Success	Private, 4-year, small	20+ years	7–10 years
Taylor	Male	White	Associate Vice President of Student Affairs & Dean of Students	Private, religiously affiliated, 4-year, small	20+ years	11–14 years
Gina	Female	White	Associate Vice President for Student Affairs (Health & Wellbeing)	Public, 4-year, large	20+ years	1–3 years
Paul	Male	White	Assistant Vice President (Health and Wellbeing)	Public, 4-year, large	20+ years	4–7 years
Laura	Female	White	Associate Vice Chancellor and Dean of Students	Public, 4-year, large	20+ years	7–10 years
Ben	Male	Black or African American	Dean of Students	Private, religiously affiliated, 4-year, small	20+ years	4–7 years
Rachel	Female	White	Associate Vice President	Public, 4-year, medium-sized	15–20 years	1–3 years
David	Male	White	Assistant Dean of Student	Private, 4-year, medium-sized	20+ years	7–10 years

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

My pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix A) collected demographic information about participants and answers to questions related to participants' current professional development. Seven of 10 participants completed the survey. Interviews represented my main data source; they allowed me to understand participants' personal experiences, opinions, and

perspectives on an issue or phenomenon (Frey, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were held to elicit professionals' experiences with topics related to employment trends, supervisory styles, and other managerial and organizational insights. A semi-structured interview protocol allowed for flexibility and follow-up probing questions (Frey, 2018). I hosted ten 45-minute interviews each followed by a personal 15-minute post-interview journaling session where I recorded my initial reactions, thoughts, and insights from each interview.

My interview protocol was informed by my sensemaking and organization framework, namely to (a) inquire about sensemaking and supervisory interactions between AVPs and their direct reports and (b) learn about how trends and other external inputs impact AVPs within their institutions. The interview protocol (see Appendix B) explored three main themes across 11 questions: (a) understanding the current climate in student affairs; (b) sensemaking/supervisory style; and (c) employment issues in student affairs.

Interviews were digitally recorded on Zoom and transcribed verbatim. All recordings, transcripts, field notes, and other research data were stored on a secure password-protected server through Boston College's network. All identifying information was removed from transcripts and pseudonyms were assigned.

Data Analysis

My data analysis was conducted at the individual level. I used Zoom software to transcribe my interviews into text and reviewed each transcript for accuracy. I used Dedoose coding software to code all transcripts looking for words or short phrases that identified different key features. Field notes and memos were utilized to summarize themes. I referred to Tesch's eight steps in the coding process (Creswell, 2018), specifically using multiple readings of transcripts to discover overarching topics and themes in addition to predetermined codes. This

approach allowed me to uncover relationships between different categories and codes.

Pre-coding memos as well as post-interview journaling, listening notes, and analytic memos helped inform my coding and analysis (Creswell, 2014). Using a deductive coding methodology, the parent and child codes referenced in Table 4 were used to initiate my data analysis. An initial list of parent codes included: sensemaking, supervisory style, impact, trends, employment, organizational frames, DEI, data, work-life balance, and roles. These codes were generated from elements of prior research (e.g., trends, sensemaking properties, organizational frames). Through the coding process, additional codes were identified through an in vivo process (e.g., mental health, pipeline, and master's program preparation) and irrelevant pre-codes were removed. The inclusion of additional codes through this inductive approach is a best practice as it reflects language and themes that emerged directly from the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). See Appendix C for the full codebook, including code descriptions.

Research questions were explored and understood through emergent themes initially discovered in the data coding and analysis process (Creswell, 2014). I began coding interview transcripts using deductive codes to identify initial themes. As a first pass at my analysis, I looked at supervisory style, trends, and role discussions related to the research questions. I completed this procedure for the initial transcript and each subsequent transcript.

For a second pass of my transcripts, I took an analytic approach that specifically used the sensemaking framework to identify elements. Even if participants did not use language and terminology of sensemaking, I identified elements of sensemaking based on the description of sensemaking in my code book (see Table 4). Properties that I focused on include retrospection, identity, and enactment.

After each interview, I added additional reflections to the handwritten notes I took during

the interviews. I reflected on particular themes for each participant and how participants'

interview comments related to those of other participants. I began to make connections between

participants, the overarching framework, and emerging themes. I captured my notes in a few

formats, including voice notes and short memos. I noted elements of similarities and differences

among participants. One similarity pertained to conversations about the increasingly

multigenerational workforce in student affairs. I also noted unique aspects of individual

participants' accounts. Even as I adapted questions, certain themes were consistently addressed

(e.g., retention, pipeline, and master's program preparation). I also reflected on ways to

illuminate these commonalities and how to translate these key themes into actionable insights for

the field.

Moreover, I did freewriting and reflection. I combined my marginal notes and reviewed

my post-interview voice and written memo reflections, using them to generate an initial list of

themes and an outline of insights. I adapted initial themes based on my coding and analysis.

Code definitions were updated as needed during analysis (Sage Research Methods, 2018), as

certain parent and child codes initially planned for did not result in meaningful use. Using

Weick's (1995) sensemaking properties within my coding framework, I separately read each

transcript and identified excerpts that resembled elements from the model. Often, sensemaking

properties were evident in participants' reflections on their past experiences (retrospection),

especially related to their identity as a professional over time (identity), and resulting actions and

approaches they currently use in their supervisory relationships (enactment). I went through

transcripts and did further coding based on the deductive codes initially included in my codebook

and additional codes that emerged through an inductive process. I made connections between my

meaning-making that ultimately resulted in the final set of findings and themes reported below.

Table 4

Code Book

Parent Code	Child Code (if applicable)
Sensemaking Properties	Identity
	Retrospection
	Enactment
	Other Properties
Supervisory Style	
Impact	Supervisor
	Employee
	Institution
	COVID-19
Role	Supervisor
	Employee
	Institution
Trends	
Employment	Recruitment
	Retention
	Resignation/Retirement
	Salary/Benefits
	Commitment
Organizational Frames	Structural
	Symbolic
	Human Resources
	Political
Data	
DEI	
Work-Life Balance	Burnout
	Flexible Work
	Mental Health
Pipeline	

Master's Preparation Programs

Trustworthiness of Data Analysis

I was careful to remain neutral during interviews to avoid introducing my own bias into a participant's response. While I did use probing follow-up questions, I did not engage in conversation in response to a participant's shared experience. To ensure validity and to affirm that the findings were faithful to the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), I used the participant's own words as much as possible when reporting my findings. I considered reflexive practices such as self-monitoring and check-ins with advisors about my findings to recognize my biases to ensure the trustworthiness of my analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). After each interview I crafted notes and memos about my initial thoughts; I debriefed with my advisor with the explicit aim of validating my initial interpretation and surfacing any biases or blind spots.

Findings

The findings responded to the two main research questions: 1) how do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of employment data and trends to inform their supervisory practice?; and 2) how do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of their roles (relationship + actions) in supporting staff members beyond university-wide HR efforts? This section outlines key findings for each of these questions. Then, I conclude by highlighting four tensions that emerged across the findings. The key findings involved recruitment, retention, and resignations; shifts in worker norms; the identity of the AVP role as supervisor; changing workforce trends; and institutional priorities.

AVP Sensemaking of Trends and Data

This section addresses the first research question. I explored how administrators used employment data and trends in their supervisory practices, guided by Weick's (1995) sensemaking properties of identity, retrospection, and enactment. I also examined evolving recruitment strategies in hybrid or flexible work settings and the effects of shifts in resignation and retirement patterns on role fulfillment and staff onboarding. The analysis then moves to new approaches in talent attraction, credential evaluation, and the inclusion of non-traditional candidates. Additionally, it highlights the growing gap between traditional workplace norms and the expectations of newer professionals, emphasizing generational differences in workplace practices.

Recruitment, Retention, and Resignation

Issues related to recruitment, retention, and resignation were ubiquitous in participants' responses. Several participants discussed challenges in recruitment, specifically in an increasingly hybrid or flexible work environment. Changes in resignation and retirement trends (with some professionals leaving the field early and others staying longer than anticipated) led to challenges in filling positions as well as new supervisory obstacles when onboarding younger and less experienced staff. Rachel stated that "retention has to do with culture." This notion was supported by other participants, including Ben, who shared that "we have a lot of traditions. We have lots of ways that we've 'always done things,' and I put that in air quotes recognizing we need to change that."

Changes in the candidate pipeline, from both a preparedness perspective and an applicant pool perspective, were common threads throughout all participants' reflections. Frank found the pipeline to be "running rather dry," and Taylor shared that "a typical residence director 5 years ago received 60 applications from mostly graduate-level professionals looking for that entry-

level position. Now we're getting five." Making sense of these changes led participants to

discuss the pipeline to the profession, credentials, and master's program preparation.

Pipeline to the Profession

The student affairs landscape is constantly evolving. The field that senior-level leaders

entered 20, 30, and even 40 years ago no longer resembles the field early and mid-career

professionals are navigating now. Participants described their own changing identities in this

profession and considered their sensemaking through a retrospective lens. Laura identified this

landscape shift highlighting how the field now requires management of

> basic needs, food insecurity, housing insecurity, emergency funding for not being able to
>
> pay for tuition or books or medications, mental health, and holistic wellness, but
>
> specifically mental health, suicidal ideation, suicide rates…conduct behaviors and
>
> academic integrity, generative AI, and the ways in which we are expected to hold
>
> students accountable for generative AI from a conduct perspective or an academic
>
> integrity perspective. There are so many ills of society that are expected to be cared for
>
> and solved by a small team of underpaid student affairs staff.

More critically, Laura was concerned about staff retention and was uncertain if professionals

would "continue to have the energy for that."

For certain student affairs roles, the pipeline has contracted as the field is no longer

competitive in the marketplace. David reinforced Laura's claim about the complexity required

for these roles alongside low pay; David defined this challenge as "a lack of qualified applicants

and qualified applicants not willing to work for the salary being offered." For staff with highly

sought-after and transferable skills, such as in counseling and psychological services, pay was

cited as a barrier that institutions could not overcome to recruit and retain quality employees.

Gina shared:

> Right now we are losing counseling center staff that are getting recruited away to either
>
> the private sector or like, say, the veterans, the VA,... they're getting pay increases of like
>
> $40,000. …When we do fill those positions after those have left…we're seeing less
>
> experienced staff members coming in.

Laura echoed this challenge about the inability to compete with benefits such as fully

remote positions and higher pay: "It is really hard to compete with these other companies, either

corporate or higher ed adjacent, that can offer 100% remote and higher salaries." These

circumstances left many participants' institutions looking for new talent pipelines, requiring a

willingness to explore non-traditional credentials.

Credentials

AVPs have had to strategize new ways to consider applicant pipelines and credentials to

recruit into entry-level and higher-level positions. Taylor shared that "we've criminally paid low

yet expected very high credentials for the people coming in." Many participants spoke of the

need to rethink the required credentials often used as a gateway to a professional role. They also

discussed considering non-traditional candidates and broadening the definition of what makes a

candidate qualified beyond traditional benchmarks.

Consistently, participants remarked that they had navigated a new approach to

recruitment. Gina prioritized hiring a quality individual above all. She said, "If you can't find that

person, don't just fill a hole because…that's the ripple effect, right, like to the people that are

reporting up through that individual." Others, such as Carole, considered how to leverage non-

traditional pathways into student affairs such as K–12 school counselors or even bartenders:

> We just don't have the staff like we used to, and the turnover. And then the folks that we're hiring are different than they used to be. Like, we used to hire people who were master's-level student affairs folks. Now we're really creative, like, 'Oh, you've got years of experience as a bartender…We think you can de-escalate a situation with alcohol,' so you know, maybe it'd be a good fit in Greek Life, maybe it'd be a good fit in [Student] Conduct.

Recruitment shifts required AVPs to address different needs in onboarding and employee support. Openness to exploring transferable skills when bringing folks in affected supervisors' thoughts about their roles and their responsibilities to support new employees.

It was clear from various participant responses that AVPs felt graduates from master's programs were not prepared to work in student affairs. Participants repeatedly stated that master's programs are too theoretical, preparing for specific "functional areas" and not for "life as a professional-at-large," as Paul put it. Furthermore, graduate assistantships and field experiences were not set up to address cultural and political skill-building. Taylor even suggested the field needs to have a critical conversation if "a master's degree should even be required." Shifts in perceptions did not end with credentials but expanded to other work norms as well.

Shifts in Worker Norms vs. Perpetuation of the Status Quo

The current workforce in higher education often involves generational dissonance between existing workplace norms and evolving expectations of new generations of professionals entering the field. This changing tide of expectations and the empowerment to request what past generations would have assumed unattainable was shared by Lucy when considering the high expectations she anticipates from younger generations in the future: "I think it's going to be a lot more—It's definitely a prediction of, like, louder voices, higher

expectations. And I don't disagree with it. I just don't know if everybody's ready for it."

Younger generations have prioritized work-life balance in a more direct and seemingly non-negotiable way than older generations. This emphasis is leading to tension for AVPs when considering their own beliefs against their employees' beliefs and those codified in institutional policies. Paul shared a difference between younger generations of professionals and himself and his more seasoned colleagues, citing that "as you move up the ladder, the work-and-life balance becomes more of an approach to integration than a separation." Taylor referenced how younger staff members'

> focus on work-life balance is a good one…I think for people coming in, they'll talk about it not just as an aside. There's an expectation of those sorts of things. I think we as student affairs haven't always been good practitioners. So for many of us that, I think, are in mid-level or higher,…I think there's that natural rub, between…'But we didn't do that, why do you?' Or 'What do you mean you are going on vacation in October? It's the school year, you know.' We only went during breaks in summer, you know, those sorts of things. ...I think as those other generations come in with different expectations about their relationship with work, I think that causes some, quite frankly, good tension. To even challenge us to think differently about the types of things that are going on.

Furthermore, the expectations of new professionals do not always align with more seasoned professionals on flexibility in work environments. Laura and Carole found that new and often younger professionals are demanding flexibility and balance and are not shy about prioritizing their mental health. Carole specifically identified how younger professionals are avoiding work settings that may contribute to undesirable stress, saying, "The interest and the ability to work in crisis or high-stress situations is much less." This lack of participation is resulting in an

experience gap. This trend is at odds with the way work, learning, and growth have been

experienced in student affairs settings—often after hours while working above and beyond stated

responsibilities, as Laura's story illustrates:

> They're missing out on those opportunities for them to learn and expand their knowledge.
>
> I just had a conversation with our chief of police last week. He had a crisis in the middle
>
> of the night [and] he called the housing person. He's like, "I'm not on duty, and I don't
>
> check my email until the next morning." So you have to call somebody else and I guess
>
> old school student affairs staff members—you worked until the job was done and the job
>
> is never done—which means you're always working. I think that's still how I am, and I
>
> suffer in that…being overworked and trying to do all the things. So again, on the one
>
> hand, I admire the boundaries. But, on the other hand, those boundaries are creating or
>
> restricting those experiences, I think, that would provide these entry-level or mid-level
>
> supervisors that expansive set of opportunities to learn more than what they are doing
>
> from an 8–to–5 type of work.

Coupled with pipeline challenges and a gap in skill-based preparation, Laura cautioned that there

is "not a lot of depth on the bench"; even when considering potential promotion opportunities,

"student affairs staff are not super interested in taking on any more than they have. …They're

like, 'We have no desire to do that job…this is an awful role, and you work too much, and we

don't want to do that.'"

These generational tensions in workplace norms led supervisors to make sense of how

their supervisory roles will either challenge or perpetuate dominant paradigms. AVPs like Laura

identified an example showcasing Weick's (1995) properties of identity, retrospection, and

enactment—specifically, how she has become more reflective about how she grew up in the

profession to pivot and be more flexible when helping her employees who offer alternative

perspectives. She explained, "I'm not going to say no right away, even though that might be my

instinct. But let's play this out a little bit and try to figure it out. How could this work? How can

we get to yes?" It was not simple to navigate these tensions. Supervisors, like Ben, recognized

how his own socialization hindered acceptance of the workplace norms and styles of new

generations. He noted,

> I'm going to at some point feel that I may get a little distant from it, …being able to
>
> continue to allow this next generation of leaders, of supervisors, to be able to take the
>
> lead to sort of believe in these new approaches that they might be bringing to the table
>
> and allowing that work to advance without, you know, being too rigid, holding on to the
>
> ways things have been. …Because otherwise, I think we'll find ourselves in a place
>
> where folks are coming with these new ideas that want to see work done a certain way,
>
> and if we don't adapt ourselves to them, they're not going to want to work in this place.
>
> They're going to want to find someplace else to go and work that will give the work that
>
> we do in student affairs a bad name, right?

Additional findings connecting how supervisors made sense of their role concerning trends and

their institutions will now be explored more deeply, addressing my second research question.

AVP's Sensemaking of Their Roles and Impact

The second set of findings responded to my second research question and related to how

administrators made sense of their role (their relationships and actions) in supporting staff

beyond institutional or HR efforts. Many participants found meaning and purpose through their

work in student affairs, specifically identifying as a supervisor and mentors. A prevalent theme

was how AVPs aimed to negotiate the boundaries of their role. Limitations such as compensation

and external factors might be counteracted by focusing on human-centered support, including valuing their employees individually, homing in on purpose-filled work, and elevating the benefits within their control.

The AVP Role as a Supervisor

AVPs often made sense of their supervisory roles through the lens of their identity and personal experiences accrued over time in the field. Paul connected the role's value to the organizational structure of student affairs, saying, "You can look at different contexts and institutional cultures…the AVP might look differently at a different institution, but…we are best able to manage implementing strategic initiatives at the unit level and in partnership with our directors." Laura identified the challenges of the position:

> It is very difficult being in this seat, and very lonely because you have direct reports and their supervisees who are looking to you for leadership and decisions. But then you have human resources and institutional policies that restrict your movement around leadership and decisions.

Rachel spoke about a commitment to supervision given her assessment that she's seeing "a new era of staff," who might come from master's programs where they can "spit theory, but they can't have a difficult conversation." She continued that, with this gap in experience, it is her job as a supervisor and that it is like "using the student development theory", but with her staff.

Frames of Organizational Leadership

A fast-paced workplace limited opportunities for AVPs to use reflective supervisory practices. The lack of time for mentorship propagated trial-by-fire socialization rather than transfers of wisdom from supervisors to their team members. Taylor, Ben, Lucy, and Laura illustrated different emphases supervisors take with more or less focus on the structural, human

resource, political, and symbolic dimensions of organizational leadership. A strong structural

frame is evident in Laura's quote above and in Taylor's view of supervision practices: "One of

the things that is important to me as a supervisor/leader is that you know I'm willing to roll up

my sleeves and do the work." Ben's emphasis, however, draws on more human resource

perspectives:

> You know, not just by giving them the flexibility with their time, but also being present
>
> with them as well. I think that it's important, particularly as senior leaders, to be seen and
>
> be visible in some of these moments as well because that used to be us. I mean, I know I
>
> did my share…But I do still think that in order to demonstrate the importance of the
>
> work, it's also important for us to be present with them when we can when it's
>
> appropriate. To show our support in those moments.

Lucy aimed to model how to navigate elements of political organizational frames:

> I feel like I've had to learn a two-handed approach where it's like, "I hear you, I'm going
>
> to validate you as much as I can…But I also need you to hear where I'm coming from."
>
> I'm also very transparent and have been like this since before…because I learned this
>
> very early on in my career…I'm never going to ask your opinion on something if it will
>
> in no way shape the decision being changed.

Paul highlighted a need to use available information (e.g., from professional associations, and

local data) to launch new approaches in supervision. He acknowledged that data may look

different now than 10 years ago; however, trends in attrition and low pay are not new. His

approach was guided by using data as one part of the story but needing "to work with each staff

member…and make it a more individualized approach." He did not equate "sameness and

fairness" and was committed to looking for ways to be flexible in his supervision.

Supervisor Training…or Not

Laura and Carole addressed challenges associated with limited or no training in being a supervisor. They additionally noted how there is limited preparation for the current pipeline of professionals who may be considering supervisory roles in the future. Laura shared:

I don't think we have time to sit and be reflective and teach new professionals how to be supervisors. I think it is baptism by fire. I think it's drinking from the fire hose, and you just learn on the job. And that's a really hard and painful way to learn. And I think I learned some of those things on the job, but I also had great mentors who took the time to sit down with me. And now, literally today, I have been in back-to-back meetings from 8:30 am until 5:00 pm…So it's time. I think time is a resource gap that we have in higher ed because we are spinning our wheels so much to stay relevant and to stay competitive that it's very hard to slow down and take the time to reflect and teach the next generation of supervisors what it means to be a good supervisor.

Carole had a mixed experience, highlighting one past supervisor who "had an office where everything was open to everybody…it didn't matter what happened. We would talk about it as a team, and I learned so much…but otherwise, nobody helped me."

Changing Workforce Trends

AVPs facilitated the meaning-making of trends and inputs from the external environment with their employees through their supervisory relationships. Sensemaking occurred by integrating trends through supervisors' unique perspectives and by acknowledging the different organizational frames that existed at their institutions. Control was a common theme for participants: what was within or outside the control of the AVP as a supervisor and within their ability to influence change for their employees.

AVPs identified a need to be politically savvy when it came to making sense of how their

roles supported their staff beyond existing structural and cultural frameworks. Supervisors

needed to be intentional about teaching and modeling this. David spoke about the time he spent

strategizing with his staff on how to cover for open positions with fewer people to get the same

work done. Change is slow at most institutions, and with new trends showing a lack of

commitment to a role or an institution, there may be less incentive for "non-lifers" to be

politically sharp. With increased job hopping, the impacts of initiatives or projects may not be

felt within the employment timeframe of a younger professional who might not stay long enough

to see an experience or project to completion.

Participants often shared feelings of being a caretaker for the student affairs profession.

This perspective was relevant in considering the perception of a job as employment for some and

a profession for others. Supervisors could no longer assume that all employees entered the field

with the same motivations and expectations; not all were willing to make the personal sacrifices

of older generations. Gina shared:

> I think it's probably in my role, I guess, as a supervisor. I think about taking care of the
>
> profession…How are we supporting that work so that we can attract intelligent, capable,
>
> smart people who want to do this work, right? And some of it is modeling work-life
>
> balance for your team. Setting expectations that people aren't to check their email after a
>
> certain amount of time.

There were examples of changing perceptions regarding career advancement, such as the

evolving role of a supervisor as a coach. Trends are changing, and the next promotion is not

always the ultimate goal. The responsibilities associated with leadership roles have shifted, and

for many, the desire for advancement has transformed. AVPs need to navigate this shift as part of

their employment strategy to ensure they can recruit and retain talented individuals at the director

level, especially when internal candidates may not be as inclined to seek promotions. Gina was

fascinated when she found herself in a scenario where two different acting directors did not seek

promotion:

> Neither one of the individuals applied to be the director when the position was posted. So
>
> I had 2 associate directors who didn't apply for various reasons…we talked about it and
>
> they just weren't ready to do the work of a director…So I think that when I reflect on that
>
> a little bit, I'm thinking, like, what makes the director role appealing or not appealing to
>
> people? And certainly with, you know, the staff transition, some of those challenges that I
>
> mentioned earlier about retaining staff or staff departure at least in a few of my units look
>
> at the director role and don't even think of an appealing role due to the stress.

David referenced a trend of shorter employment terms with employees not staying in a position

or with an institution; there appeared to be less affinity or loyalty to a role or an institution.

David referenced early career employees "job hopping" and spending less than a year in a

position. Different priorities and definitions of what a career should look like were reflected in

Carole's remarks about the value of benefits that have changed over time (e.g., stability of state

employment, and pensions). Lucy reinforced changes with how some professionals currently feel

about moving to an institution that might be at risk of closure.

When long-term employees leave, new employees feel pressure to conform to prior

customs and work styles. Retirement opens new opportunities and generational perspectives but

also institutional history/learning loss. AVPs need to navigate the tension around staff leaving

prematurely, candidates being promoted too early, or staff not being ready to fill certain roles.

AVPs also have to manage the impact of hiring new employees for existing staff and the

potential effects on students. Lucy witnessed many talented higher education professionals switching to higher education adjacent tech firms for a better work environment or because "the pandemic has done such a number on them that they are leaving the university and student affairs altogether. And so what that leaves us is the promotion of staff members who are not particularly seasoned enough to go into those supervisory positions."

Post-COVID: Demands for Flexibility/Work from Home

Trends in the workforce and societal perceptions of how and where work can be accomplished have been fast-tracked into the public discourse in higher education during the height of the post-COVID era. The tension between being asked to "do it all" during COVID-19: transitioning to a fully remote work environment, then to a hybrid environment in response to emergency mandates, and finally managing post-pandemic rigidity in work policies—caused employees to feel devalued. Supervisors such as Laura were fortunate to have an administration open to telework and hybrid arrangements and leveraged these options as a retention strategy. She mentioned colleagues at other universities in her state who did not have this flexibility, which created a situation of the "haves and have-nots…" Cited as a recruitment benefit, she also shared, "It has been the most challenging supervisory experience that I've had in my 26 years of being a higher ed professional." Her observation encapsulated the struggle leaders face in balancing employees' desire for work flexibility (resulting from successful outcomes during the acute COVID-19 period) against institutional reluctance to universally embrace hybrid policies after the pandemic. Despite benefiting recruitment and retention, Laura felt it was very challenging to build a community to pull people into those "water cooler conversations." David and Ben addressed a unique challenge based on the location of their institutions. David's department lost several professionals during the pandemic who decided to relocate closer to

family. His institution's location, far from other colleges and universities, did not have "local folks to draw on, at least who have a level of experience that we're looking for." Ben had a different issue: his institution, in "one of the wealthiest and most expensive counties," was pricing out potential employees unwilling to live further from campus where housing was more affordable.

It would be premature to assume that the post-COVID generation of professionals, regardless of age, will be willing to sign the social contract that previously existed or the one now being presented to student affairs professionals as the only option for working in the future. Many participants cited flexibility as a tool for negotiating this changing recruitment landscape. Laura articulated that this opportunity comes with a cost: "From a recruitment perspective, it is helpful to say we have the opportunity to offer 2 days a week. When it comes to retention …staff are under-resourced or understaffed…So I think on the retention end, we can pull people in…we're not always able to keep the promise which leads to [staff] being hard to retain."

Institutional Realities and Priorities

AVPs aimed to navigate uncertainty for their employees in ways that would empower and develop staff, but formal procedures were often seen as rigid and reactive. The future seems unknown for many institutions (whether based on reality or feared due to trends in college closings). An institution's financial health also influences employment and staff members' experiences. AVP-level administrators needed to be prepared to translate the meaning of institutional financial models to their teams, whether in reinforcing specific decisions or the impact of financial health on the culture and climate (i.e., staffing, priorities, reduction in professional development). As Taylor noted, "The demands, particularly in student affairs, on student affairs educators, just continue to increase. But at the same time, our body count in terms

of human resources has decreased." The tension between the institutional environment and staff

capacity frequently left teams looking to supervisors for guidance on how to interpret and

respond to such challenges.

Additionally, enrollment trends (both declining and increasing enrollment) naturally

affect how AVPs make sense of their ability to support their employees and institutions. The

national drop in college-aged students forecasted for 2025 and concurrent demographic shifts

will require responsiveness from university administrators beyond admissions and academic

affairs. Participants spoke about struggling to reconcile institutions demanding more with limited

resources and formal policies codifying defensive postures. Leadership in unstable situations is

challenging, as Taylor shared related to budget challenges: "The expectations don't lessen

because their budget lessens." He further addressed how the demands, particularly on student

affairs educators, continue to increase without additional personnel to support those demands,

and how

> at the same time, our body count in terms of human resources has decreased and the
>
> monies that we have to do the things that we like to do—programming, team building….
>
> has decreased over time. So I think some of it is certainly a kind of cheerleading in my
>
> role and helping to kind of frame the current climate that we're in, and we'll probably,
>
> quite frankly, continue to be into perpetuity, at least, for where I am in my career.

AVPs' own meaning-making and framing processes were often in conflict with formalized

institutional sensemaking represented by policies complicating how AVPs navigated

uncertainties for staff during times of change. Taylor articulated the uncertainty of supervising

alongside institutional enrollment challenges: "We're really going to fight every year to make

sure we're making our class." Carole needed to navigate a strategy including a 20% increase in

enrollment for the freshman class with stagnant staffing levels. Her approach was to consider

priorities only: "What is it that we need to do?... And then there are some other things that we'd

like to do for our students…What are some simple but remarkable services that we could provide

like on the student life side? Let's do a few things really well." Personally, Lucy wrestled with

an "unsteady" feeling related to increases in school closures and mergers, including of a campus

"close to home…it doesn't feel great." The external environment and institutional priorities

cannot be divorced from the day-to-day lived experiences of AVPs and their teams. The

supervisory approaches AVPs take, alongside human resource practices, should aim to mitigate

undue employee stress and ambiguity.

AVPs' Relationships with HR

Despite some level of support, participants found prescribed human resource practices

and policies conflicting with their preferred leadership approaches. For example, Laura often

struggled with institutional HR policies: "As a supervisor, I sometimes find myself at odds with

human resources and institutional policies because they were written through the lens of

protection, and risk management, and litigation mitigation, not through the lens of growing and

developing and helping humans."

AVPs identified challenges related to navigating the recruitment and onboarding of non-

traditional candidates into roles. Laura identified a sense of loneliness when she has direct

reports who look to the AVP for leadership and decisions, and at the same time, she feels

restricted by institutional policy. She framed this tension sharing that "human resources and

institutional policies that restrict your movement around leadership and decisions, and in my

opinion, don't take a very human-centered developmental approach." Lucy struggled with

institutional policies that were more tailored for a "9-to-5 approach." With a no comp time

policy, she struggled navigating staff at events until 4 a.m. or staff who were called at 3 a.m. because a student died by suicide. She did, however, feel empowered to make sure her staff were given the support to work at a pace that was sustainable and believed it is necessary to "take care of yourself first, so that you can take care of others, namely, our students."

Carole brought up a need to look at potential candidates in a new way, specifically considering areas in which supervisors have control (e.g., how AVPs recruit staff and think about minimum qualifications). She continued, "We spend a lot of time explaining to human resources how somebody may have the same skills, even though their background doesn't look like what we would have gone after a few years ago." David, however, characterized his relationship with HR more positively, citing an HR department that has been "proactive about looking at salaries and trying to find positions where we were underpaying folks compared to other positions in our region."

Key Themes

In this study, I set out to answer the following questions: 1) how do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of employment data and trends to inform their supervisory practice?; and 2) how do AVP-level student affairs administrators make sense of their role in supporting staff members beyond university-wide HR efforts?

Five main findings emerged: 1) issues of recruitment, retention, and resignation; 2) shifts in worker norms; 3) considering identity as a supervisor; 4) changing workforce trends; and 5) institutional priorities. These issues suggest tensions that exist in different ways and require navigation by AVPs. Tension arose when AVPs thought about their identities, roles, and values alongside their employees and their institutions. AVPs also navigated the political tensions between competing perspectives and priorities. When there were varied levels of influence and

access to decision-makers, AVPs needed to wrestle with distinct priorities among employees, senior leaders, and other stakeholders. Tensions are also related to changing work expectations. New worker norms and shifts in workplace climate expectations have created tensions as new generations of employees enter institutions and current employees evolve with changing societal trends. Additionally, recruitment competition was a tension point with corporate and higher education-adjacent fields luring traditional student affairs professionals away from many institutions.

Tensions

The concept of tension is a key theme requiring dedicated attention. From the examples cited above and others represented in the findings, four main tensions emerged, representing the complex sensemaking undertakings for student affairs leaders. AVPs often navigated their roles as part institutional strategists and part on-the-ground practitioners, positions which often pulled them in multiple directions. Supervisors must make sense of external pressures reshaping campus environments to guide teams facing enrollment fluctuations, budget cuts, public skepticism, and demographic shifts arriving at their office doors.

The four central tensions are 1) administrative identity vs. relationships with staff; 2) providing support while operating within constraints; 3) supporting staff needs vs. supporting institutional priorities (misalignment); and 4) navigating workplace culture and generational differences. Together, these tensions highlighted how AVPs grappled to make sense of whose interests were being served (e.g., staff, institution, leadership, dominant paradigms, teams) with multiple forces pulling their perceptions, beliefs, and actions about effective supervision in opposing directions.

The first two tensions address my first research question. The third and fourth tensions

respond to Research Question 2.

1) Administrative identity vs. relationships with staff: AVPs interpreted trends through the lens of their own identity and their progression through the field. This often showed up as reflective and retrospective as AVPs considered their own experiences alongside what they were witnessing in the field. With new generations of professionals entering the field with different perspectives, preferences, and preparation, AVPs needed to navigate the tension between their long-held values, preferences, and work norms—and challenges to those norms.

2) Providing support and operating within constraints: AVPs needed to balance the tension between their staff's needs and external realities. AVPs aimed to support their staff (and their goals and beliefs,) within the limitations of their role and of institutional capacity to respond to different trends. Supervisors interpreted the employment and institutional climate, especially around compensation, institutional policy, and limitations within the institutional context. They then need to make meaning of their ability to support their staff.

3) Supporting staff needs vs. supporting institutional priorities: Financial implications throughout higher education impacted supervision and decision-making that affected employment. Relevant issues include financial models, budgets, enrollment trends, staffing levels, and work expectations.

4) Navigating workplace culture and generational differences: AVPs needed to navigate the tension between established norms, emerging trends, and the unwillingness of new professionals to conform to outdated ways of working. Changing employment trends alongside a more diverse and multigenerational workforce impacted how supervisors

make sense of their beliefs, their role, and their advocacy as worker norms have been

challenged and priorities around work-life balance have shifted.

Insights

Spheres of Influence

AVPs identified needing to navigate their role within their limited sphere of influence. As

supervisors, this limited sphere of influence resulted in the need to mediate the tension between

what can be done while also justifying what cannot be done. For many, strategies involved

finding ways to work around systems or structures to support their employees. Ben, Laura, Lucy,

and Rachel each spoke of individualized approaches to support their employees in ways within

their control. Often in student affairs, participants asked their teams to lean into "purpose-filled

work" as a form of compensation when salary and benefits were not satisfactory or keeping up. I

believe that supervisors in corporate professions, or even other helping professions (excluding

K–12 and non-profit/service work), would not be held to this same standard.

Identity in the Profession

Identity in the profession, and how it differs across age and levels of experience, was significant

in participant responses. It is critical to look at the differences among generational cohorts and to

come to terms with changing work preferences, not only for the future of the profession but also

for ways supervisors will need to evolve in their approaches to leadership. Some findings

indicated AVPs' willingness to pivot—even with frustration over shifts in generational values.

Ben and Lucy demonstrated this openness, first by recognizing their own biases and then by

demonstrating a curiosity to consider new perspectives.

While gender identity did not emerge as a notable theme impacting AVP sensemaking of

trends or their roles as supervisors, elements of a supervisor's or employee's life stage did

surface. Their life stage, whether they were new to an AVP role or closer to retirement, was a point of reflection. The implications of different life stages on employment, whether related to flexibility or priorities, affected how participants made sense of their supervision, including how they navigated differing perspectives and potential biases. This surfaced for participants surrounding caregiving responsibilities, both for themselves and their employees. Specifically, the context of professionals balancing childcare with their student affairs role or assumptions about the priorities and capabilities of colleagues without children or partners were discussed. The perception that those without a spouse or children could or should sacrifice more was felt by both participants and their employees.

Master's Program Preparation

While master's preparation programs provided field experiences and assistantships, these opportunities were not considered adequate to produce strong entry-level student affairs professionals. Entry- and mid-level professionals need more access and exposure to different functional paths and skill-building that supports the business side of work, not only the specifics of a functional area. Professionals also need more experience to develop, refine, and reflect on supervision and the types of actions supervisors often navigate (e.g., difficult conversations, advocacy, human resources, budgeting, and strategic decision-making). Overall, a culture shift is needed that values and protects time for the continuous development professionals require to cultivate meaningful supervisory relationships. Preparing and managing expectations about roles and responsibilities can help protect the pipeline into the profession as well as retention and satisfaction.

Institutional Context

My sample encompassed broad diversity in institution size, location, type, and affiliation, however, the sensemaking reflections of AVPs did not differ significantly. The implications of trends appeared to transcend institution location or type, necessitating AVPs to engage in sensemaking and problem-solving around similar topics and themes. Higher education as a sector is influenced by the external environment, including industry norms, competition, regulations, public perception, and other factors beyond the direct control of an individual institution. These overarching factors may explain some of the foundational similarities in experiencing trends despite institutional differences.

How different participants navigated their relationships and environments, however, proved to be the unique element; AVPs needed to respond within the distinct culture of their institutions and their own experiences and identities. Further, institutional priorities and available resources were factors necessitating individual sensemaking and responses within different contexts.

Limitations

This study possessed a targeted scope and specific limitations that warrant consideration in the future. As a solo-authored study, the analysis was inherently subject to my interpretation and positionality. Additionally, the decision to exclusively interview professionals at the assistant and associate vice president levels imposed constraints on the generalizability of my findings to other position levels or divisions at an institution. Despite this constraint, the findings may serve as a foundation for research with different cohorts within student affairs and the broader higher education context.

Moreover, the sample was predominantly drawn from individuals actively participating in professional associations like NASPA. It is essential to acknowledge that those with access to and willingness to engage in professional associations might be more predisposed to committing to supervisory development or staying informed about current trends and practices in higher education and student affairs. Furthermore, while the sample was varied in terms of gender and area of responsibility, racial diversity was lacking. This limitation is noteworthy as workforce trends and experiences are not immune to the systemic issues of racism and diversity prevalent in American higher education.

An additional limitation, although specifically referenced, is the positioning of this study at a specific point in time: post-COVID-19. The myriad of variables that impacted individuals, families, communities, institutions, and the overall higher education sector could not all be addressed within the scope of this sensemaking research.

Conclusion

How AVPs navigated trends and tensions in an increasingly multigenerational workforce provided an opportunity to inform new approaches for the future. Current misalignments that exist did not suggest one generational perspective is valued over another. Rather, student affairs professionals are not immune from the shifts happening in employee relationships in work settings within and outside of higher education. Divisions of student affairs are still responding to the aftermath of COVID-19 and professionals' new expectations about their roles and priorities. What was asked of many student affairs professionals during COVID-19 will remain in the collective memory of the field. I believe these shared experiences, along with pre-COVID trends, will inform how supervisors approach supporting their staff in the future.

The purpose of this study was to explore how AVP-level student affairs administrators made sense of their supervisory relationships through a process called sensemaking. Identity, spheres of influence, and a consideration of changing norms in the student affairs profession were key insights from the data analysis. The four main tensions identified will require strategy and reflection to manage. These tensions are not static problems to be solved. Tension may exist in different forms and respond to different trends over time. Laura's invitation to be hopeful through sensemaking reinforces the need for strategy:

> I think the opportunities come with being curious instead of being frustrated… and to spend time to be in reflection and introspection about who we are and where we sit in relation to the world, and how that shows up as supervisors and leaders of other people.

Supervisors must be prepared with agile approaches to manage the future of student affairs.

Chapter 3: Recommendations for Action

As a supervisor, I think if you're not finding a way to prioritize your people, you will lose

your people. - Lucy, Associate Dean of Students

In this volatile stage for student affairs and higher education overall, institutions have made and will continue to make hard decisions that impact their staff. Strategies that build professionals' skills to navigate temporary or permanent shifts in "culture, rituals, and rhythms" can bring clarity that for many employees is currently missing (Barbaro et al., 2024). The days when the halls of higher education were insulated from the corporatization of the external world are long gone. New technologies and changes in the corporate work environment have changed expectations about credentials, training, work modes, and communication for higher education personnel. Shifts in the value proposition of higher education, socio-political unrest, increased compliance, and high-touch services in student affairs are altering the pipeline to the profession and presenting challenges with retention. For supervisors and their employees, these issues may manifest as tensions to be addressed.

Effective supervision is an organizational imperative (Green & Davis, 2021). The supervisory relationship is a key indicator of staff socialization and satisfaction in student affairs (Boehman, 2007; Davis & Cooper, 2017; Perez & Haley, 2021). Considering post-pandemic employment trends and wavering satisfaction among student affairs employees, there is a need to leverage these relationships to support positive outcomes in retention. The goal of this study was to identify how leaders make sense of and prepare for changes in employment and other trend transitions to facilitate positive outcomes and satisfaction for staff. My findings suggest that one way to support such outcomes is to proactively engage with employees around topics of tension.

Navigating Tension

My results illuminated four tensions that AVPs encounter as supervisors: 1) administrative identity vs. relationships with staff; 2) providing support while operating within constraints; 3) supporting staff needs vs. supporting institutional priorities (misalignment); and 4) navigating workplace culture and generational differences.

Discovering the roots of these misalignments requires AVPs to explore tension—the disconnected feelings that restrict themselves and the professionals they work with from full commitment and satisfaction in their jobs. In addressing these issues, AVPs and other supervisors in student affairs can take steps to move the needle toward improving employment outcomes. These steps involve using the supervisory relationship as a space for inquiry, reflection, and planning for action around issues of tension in the workplace. Examples may be drawn from the key tensions experienced by AVPs in my findings related to identity, misaligned priorities, external pressures, and worker norms. Other examples may arise organically from the unique supervisor-employee relationships at specific institutions. Senior leaders in student affairs must prioritize this work to expose and address tensions that exist and to foster alignment for their staff and institutions.

The Power of Questions

In the field of philanthropic giving, one of the most effective ways to encourage donors to give is to ask them (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). Many people are willing to share and donate if they are simply asked. I believe that the curiosity to ask questions is also key to uncovering how to engage professionals in the complex problems of employment satisfaction in student affairs. It is not about asking if somebody is happy, inquiring about their passion, or if they are okay, although these aspects can be relevant. It is about being curious regarding the tensions that exist

for professionals working in the post-COVID-19 era of student affairs. Participants in my study shared that having meaningful relationships with their employees allowed them to take more individualized approaches to supervision. Laura and Carole each addressed this, with Laura highlighting a need to be curious and "spend time to be in reflection." Carole felt compelled to prepare her employees for potential future leadership roles, considering "how do I show them—not just their slice of the pie, but the whole pie so that they can see the greater context, understand decision making, and to be prepared for that seat." Addressing more complex conversations around the tensions that supervisors and employees each face may help support both parties when a strong foundation accompanies the supervisory relationship.

Tool for Change

My tool for change is a supervision framework that invites participants to explore issues of tension through guided questions. This tool is meant to address the need for supervisors and employees to explore these issues within the current climate of student affairs. The tool will provide a structure for conversation and questioning that will foster reflection. Ultimately, addressing uncertainty, seeking clarity, and making sense of tensions in student affairs will result in increased understanding for employees and, hopefully, satisfaction.

While my key themes uncovered that AVPs in student affairs experience different tensions as they make sense of their supervisory role, neither the utility of my framework nor the focal tensions are limited to supervisors who are AVPs. All professionals should be open to engaging, reflecting, and acting—and continuing the cycle—to broaden their skill sets while working in complex organizations such as colleges and universities.

My recommendation is a framework for different levels of professionals to enhance their comprehension of and competence in navigating the tensions that exist in their professional roles.

The framework will also highlight ways to strengthen skills to be effective in supervision. Guiding employees through this process may have an additional impact on modeling effective supervision for future generations of leaders.

Commitment

My tool for change is meant to be a commitment. Effective supervision is not a one-stop "hmm…this is nice" conversation that ends once the employee leaves their scheduled meeting and the conversation does not connect to future action. Without commitment, this approach would be no different than the topical solutions which only provide a small window to engage and not a robust strategy to change mindsets and ultimately outcomes. A solution cannot simply treat the symptoms with a Band-Aid approach. Solutions should aim to identify the root causes of misalignments and tensions and focus on seeking understanding through questioning, conversation, and reflection between a supervisor and employee. Ultimately, these conversations and reflections should inform action.

Why Student Affairs Professionals?

Student affairs professionals are known for excelling in crisis response. Frank acknowledged how student affairs is "constantly in a place of catching up and trying to put out fires and plug holes." Frank revealed how the natural inclination to respond often absorbs much of the bandwidth that could otherwise be used to be proactive and reflective in work. Professionals will benefit from protected time to reflect. Reflection, discernment, and critical thinking about the complex issues professionals face, along with dedicated time in the supervisory space, may increase alignment and alleviate uncertainty.

New Professionals

Many participants identified a need to change the approaches in master's preparation

programs for candidates to succeed in their first roles. Participants suggested that there is a disconnect between new professionals' perceptions of the roles they are being hired into and the reality of work once they are onboarded. Participants suggested that master's programs focus on content knowledge over foundational administrative skills resulting in a gap in training that graduate assistantship positions do not seem to fill. Therefore, many new employees are not prepared for, as Paul called it, "the realities of work" in today's student affairs environment. An ability to engage in conversations of tension to course-correct early in a career may help new professionals gain valuable skills as they are onboarded. This proactive approach will hopefully prevent new professionals from feeling jaded by an experience that did not meet their expectations or preconceived notions.

Mid-Level Professionals and Above

Beyond the new professional role, many participants shared how supervision is not explicitly taught; some were lucky enough to have excellent role models or to have observed best practices during their career trajectories. Most had been promoted into leadership roles that included supervision and it was learning as you go. As educators, student affairs administrators of all levels—especially those moving into supervisory spaces—will benefit from a commitment where they can evaluate and engage in reflective practices about their work, current events, issues, and strategies for success. One theme from my findings addressed a need to be open and engage with different generational perspectives. Different than for new professionals, mid- and senior-level professionals will have the added elements of hindsight, a broader view, and potentially personal experiences on which to build. This framework offers professionals holding mid- and senior-level roles the ability to grow by engaging with their supervisors as much as they will when supporting those who report to them.

Alignment with Divisional, Institutional, and Professional Competencies

Beyond inclusion in standard one-on-one supervisory conversations, my framework can supplement performance reviews or goal-setting plans to formalize an institution's or division's commitment to this approach. The framework may also be used in partnership with employee development programs through offices of human resources as a model for leadership development plans for promising supervisors in all areas. It will be specifically useful to keep supervision and reflection as priorities in leadership development as professionals move through their careers. This tool for change may also complement resources such as *The Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (College Student Educators International [ACPA] & NASPA, 2010), which outlines the scope and content of professional competencies required of student affairs professionals, and presents them for foundational, intermediate, and advanced levels.

Purpose of the Tool

The purpose of my tool is to provide a framework to role model the navigation of conversation and reflection around topics of tension. Through a series of questions, an employee (along with their supervisor as a thought partner) can engage in meaningful conversation, explore different contexts and perspectives, and make a plan. Supervisor-led conversations aim to fill gaps in understanding or experience from graduate preparation programs, staff entering the field from non-traditional paths, and professionals of all levels who are confronting the changing landscape of higher education in an increasingly complex society. Some of these topics may come up naturally in a standard one-on-one meeting. Overall, though, the goal is to enhance employees' abilities to learn and build capacity by exploring tension points to find clarity and alignment for future action and satisfaction.

Conversational Model

Issues of tension exist at every level of the student affairs profession. Most institutions do not give adequate time and space to discuss these issues in meaningful ways. When areas of tension go unrecognized, professionals may feel devalued, burnt out, and out of sync with their work. Committing time to uncover solutions can enhance professionals' experiences in the field by revealing unknown viewpoints, fostering understanding, and leading to potential realignment with one's role. If realignment is not possible, a supervisor and employee should unpack the next steps for the employee's future. These conversations will help connect perception to reality while bringing forward potential knowledge gaps that may provide context—and hopefully reduce frustration for employees.
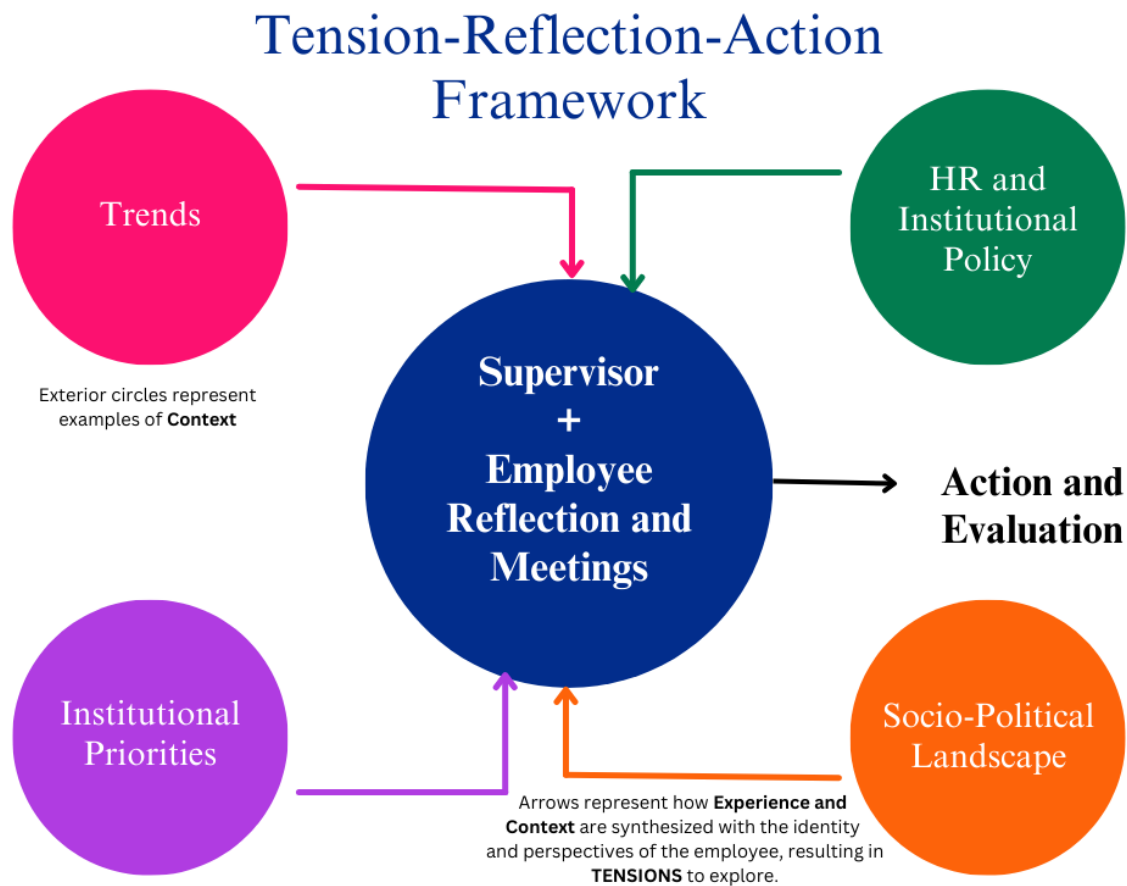
Divisions of student affairs typically rely on supervisors who choose to invest their time and energy into developing future generations of leaders in the field. Job descriptions often list supervision as a standard management function versus expressing a commitment to effective supervision as a means to support the future of student affairs. Put simply, not all supervisors' training and willingness to dive deep into formative conversations with their employees are created equal. Some employees are left without space and time to engage in conversation and development to grow within their chosen profession; these professionals may feel jaded because they do not have the time or the commitment from their employer to think about the issues they face and how to move forward.

The Process

This framework includes elements of the *Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm* (St. Louis University, n.d.) which is rooted in the educational philosophy of St. Ignatius of Loyola. It is a holistic approach to teaching and learning that is most often associated with Jesuit education.

This holistic paradigm consists of five stages applied to teaching and learning. The five stages are (a) context, acknowledging the unique identities, backgrounds, and circumstances of the supervisor and employee; (b) experience, involving how to engage the employee and supervisor within their professional roles; (c) reflection, which utilizes guided questioning to foster deeper mutual understanding; (d) action, applying insights through implementation plans or continued exploration; and (e) evaluation, assessing outcomes and the status of initial tensions while reinforcing the need for ongoing dialogue. This paradigm couples nicely with both Weick's (1995) work on sensemaking and Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four-Frame Model. I built the paradigm upon the Sensemaking and Organizational Framework referenced in Chapter 1, Figure 1. In translating the elements of the *Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm* to a framework supporting professionals, context acknowledges the unique circumstances, identities, and backgrounds of the employee and supervisor. Experience involves engaging both parties within the scope of their professional roles. Reflection encourages contemplation of their experiences, fostering deeper understanding through guided questioning. Action involves the application of insights or a plan for continued exploration. It offers an iterative process model for supervisors to nurture professional growth and organizational alignment through continuous guided conversation. The goal is transformative change via purposeful reflection and action. Figure 2 visualizes the process of this tool for change.

Figure 2

Tension-Reflection-Action Framework

Tension-Reflection-Action Framework

Trends

HR and Institutional Policy

Exterior circles represent examples of **Context**

Supervisor + Employee Reflection and Meetings

Action and Evaluation

Institutional Priorities

Socio-Political Landscape

Arrows represent how **Experience and Context** are synthesized with the identity and perspectives of the employee, resulting in **TENSIONS** to explore.

Pathways to Practice

There are two approaches to applying this framework: the prescriptive pathway takes a proactive approach by scheduling discussions around predictable career tensions; the responsive pathway assumes an adaptive approach by initiating conversations to address supervisor–employee dynamics as they emerge. Each pathway provides value in navigating supervision challenges. The examples referenced in Table 5 are drawn from AVP participants' descriptions of situations with employees in the post-pandemic work environment.

Table 5

Process for Initiating a Pathway

The Prescriptive Pathway: Pre-existing Tensions Built in as part of a Professional Development Plan	The Responsive Pathway: Tensions Initiated by Supervisor or Employee Responsive to a Current Reality
Options of tensions that transcend any specific moment in time or context. These conversations are focused on building skills and leadership capacity. Tensions may include: ● Administrative identity vs. relationship with staff ● Providing support and operating within constraints ● Supporting staff needs vs. supporting institutional priorities (misalignment) ● Navigating workplace culture and generational differences	Tensions are individual to the employee or supervisor, their institution or context, within a specific environment and time. These conversations are focused on reducing misalignment, building commitment, and increasing satisfaction. Tensions may include: ● I do not agree with a public statement made by the president or senior administrator at our institution, and I am struggling to make peace with it. ● I am frustrated by the inequities in benefits across our and other divisions when it comes to work-from-home approval. ● The role post-pandemic is not the same as it was pre-COVID-19. I am unsure what this means for me. ● My office culture is tense. The personalities seem to always be in conflict and do not seem to understand each other. (See Appendix D for additional tensions)
These conversations can be scheduled as part of a predetermined professional development plan for an employee. They can happen within or in addition to scheduled 1-on-1 supervisory meetings.	These conversations are initiated on an ad hoc basis as tension presents itself. Initiation can come from either the supervisor or the employee. Once initiated, conversations should be scheduled within or in addition to scheduled 1-on-1 supervisory meetings.
The topic of tension is shared and the first meeting is scheduled for 60–90 minutes	
Preparing for the conversations Pre-work includes reflective worksheets as well as exploratory journaling based on a list of questions (see Appendix E). An agenda can be shared to ensure mutual expectations are met. (See Appendix F for a sample).	

Meeting #1
Guided by the supervisor, conversation prompts will aid in illuminating the context of the specific tension as well as areas where conversation can support learning and discernment. By the conclusion of this meeting, action steps should be identified.

Post-meeting reflection

Meeting #2
Guided by the supervisor, this conversation will focus on new perspectives and/or behavior changes that may reduce tension and increase clarity. A goal by the end of this second meeting is to (a) determine if further conversations are needed or (b) map out the next steps to ensure the employee feels engaged, aligned, and satisfied with any outcomes.

The Prescriptive Pathway, as part of a professional development plan, should close with an evaluation of the process. Supervisors should revisit the experience periodically in 1-on-1 meetings, during future exercises of professional development, and in performance appraisals, as appropriate.	The Responsive Pathway, being an exercise addressing a current tension, should close with a commitment by the supervisor to follow up and support the employees as they navigate strategies moving forward. Follow-up should happen during scheduled 1-on-1 meetings by promoting ad hoc experiences for the employee. It should also be reflected as meaningful professional development in performance appraisals as appropriate.

Preparing for the First Meeting

Once a topic of tension is identified, the supervisor should initiate pre-meeting work including reflection worksheets and exploratory journaling based on a list of questions (see Appendix E). I suggest setting aside 60–90 minutes to ensure enough time to engage thoughtfully. Depending on available space, it may be desirable to find a neutral space for meetings or a space that fosters conversation (vs. across an office desk or in a conference room). This can be determined in light of participants' preferences and available space.

Agenda for the Conversation

An agenda can be mutually created between both the employee and the supervisor (see Appendix F for a sample). Each agenda should start with an intentional review of meeting

ground rules and shared values. These should include but not be limited to using active listening, speaking from personal experience instead of generalizations, and being open to challenging a perspective respectfully. Ground rules should aim to affirm sharing and engaging with different perspectives versus feeling defensive over opposing views. Creating a space for open and honest conversation will foster outcomes where both the supervisor and employee can learn and grow. The supervisor and employee should come to the first meeting with their pre-work exploratory journaling complete and ready to share. The pre-conversation reflection worksheets can provide a starting point to build out the agenda, as both parties may identify areas requiring additional preparation to make the conversation as productive as possible. Additionally, pre-conversation worksheets can guide reflection over time and connect with other performance appraisal or professional development plans. Meeting agendas that expand on prior conversations should include time for a brief recap and reflection.

Use of Reflection Prompts and Questions

The primary strategy of the framework is to map out prompts and questions to encourage reflection. Following individual reflection, employees will share insights through a guided conversation with their supervisor. These questions and prompts will help the supervisor and employee find similarities and differences in their perspectives. Both parties will also be able to identify misunderstandings or areas needing more clarity or information. Similar to a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, this approach is meant to provide a holistic look at the context of an issue (an existing tension in this case), to initiate movement from understanding to reflection to action. The supervisor can also assist with illuminating ways to approach the tension, whether it be from different positional perspectives, different organizational frames (Bolman & Deal, 2017), or other preferred frameworks or paradigms.

Participants identified that the AVP role positioned them well to support sensemaking with their employees. Paul said this well: "The beauty, I think, of an AVP job, is that I have to work closely with the directors…to help the directors make sense of all the noise that's above them." He acknowledged how the role is one of support and advocacy. The care for the profession was also shared by other participants through their commitment to supporting personal well-being in addition to professional development.

For an initial journal prompt after a tension point is identified, I recommend a basic set of questions. These questions seek to broaden understanding and acknowledge a need to explore perspectives beyond one's own. Prompts include "Where am I curious?", "What might I not know?", "Who can be a thought partner in this reflection?", "What are alternative perspectives?", and "What is within or outside of my control?" For additional reflection questions and journal prompts, including a sample worksheet, see Appendix E.

When considering questions to prepare for a first conversation, I suggest a predetermined list of questions may be appropriate for the prescriptive pathway. As for the responsive pathway, supervisors and employees may pick from a list of reflection questions they find appropriate and relevant to stimulate robust conversation. Sample questions include "What are my priorities?", "What are the institution's priorities?", "Where do these priorities differ?", "Where are they alike?", "Where is the tension or disconnect?", "What do I need to understand about the situation to move forward successfully?", "Where am I left curious and needing to know more?", "Who can I connect with to feel more confident in this area?", and "After reflection, if I cannot navigate the tension, what can I do next?" For additional question prompts, see Appendix F.

I have proposed lists of questions; however, supervisors can adjust and be responsive to the unique context of their institution and their relationship with a given employee. Ultimately,

the questions and prompts are meant to foster reflection about an employee's experiences.

Reflections should lead to action and build capacity around areas of empathy, negotiation, self-

management, curiosity, understanding of the work culture and climate, decision-making and

influence, and the concept and impact of time.

Supervisory Meeting #1

Meetings are intended to be conversations about an employee's perspective,

understanding, and feelings related to the identified tension. Questions are meant to help the

supervisor tease out information, determine where opportunities might exist, make connections

with potential resources, and prepare for a resolution to the meeting. A resolution to the meeting

will ensure that the employee has felt heard and is equipped with tangible next steps to help

move the process from reflection to action.

Reflecting on the Conversation

Reflection after the conversation will allow both the supervisor and the employee to

consider multiple perspectives and frames when making sense of the chosen tension. It is

important to designate time to follow up to address any insights uncovered through reflection to

move forward with potential action steps. This phase is intended to encourage learning and to

alleviate feelings of misalignment where possible. The tension will hopefully be replaced with

clarity—both for the supervisor in supporting their employee and for the employee in managing

their approach going forward.

Second and Additional Follow-up Meetings

Supervisors and employees should meet at least twice to work through a specific tension.

Time in between meetings allows for additional sensemaking and reflection. Ideally, at the

second meeting, reflection will move towards action. Action can manifest in many ways. Action

can be a professional development plan for an employee that provides new knowledge

opportunities or skill-building and support in an area of tension. Action can be a commitment by

either party to act or behave in a new way. Action can be a supervisor choosing to mentor or

sponsor the employee using a new approach. Action can be advocacy by a supervisor on behalf

of an employee. Action can be honoring a change of perspective, a sense of realignment, or a

realization of misalignment leading to further discernment.

Post-Experience Evaluation and Next Steps

Following a second meeting, or upon completing what are deemed appropriate

conversations to explore the specific topic of tension, the supervisor and employee should each

evaluate the experience as well as the process. Revising the desired outcomes from the first

meeting helps determine success. Success may not be solving the problem or removing the

tension; rather, each party may have increased clarity to navigate the tension effectively.

Examples Using Prescriptive Pathway Tensions

Tension 1: Administrative Identity vs. Relationships with Staff

The focus of the conversation will be reflecting on the supervisors' experience in the field

over time, and how to remain flexible and curious to support different perspectives from their

employees and teams. The tension to be examined is how to navigate long-held values,

preferences, and worker norms—and challenges to those norms.

Tension 2: Providing Support While Operating Within Constraints

The focus of the conversation will be understanding institutional influence and the

political, financial, or strategic realities that pose limitations to a supervisor's ability to support

an employee or team in a specific way. The tension to examine is the misalignment between

what the role of a supervisor can provide and the identified needs of employees. Examples

include issues around compensation and work flexibility; navigating rising enrollment with stagnant budget and staffing levels; and long-term staff openings burning out remaining staff. Another example is the inability to share information that might be helpful to an employee, but must remain confidential at the AVP level.

Tension 3: AVPs' Desire to Support Staff Needs vs. Supporting Institutional Priorities (Misalignment)

The focus of the conversation will be on feeling stuck between multiple stakeholders' needs; to develop approaches that balance honesty and alignment in supervisory approaches.

The tension to examine is the competing priorities between employee needs and expectations or demands from senior or influential stakeholders. Examples include statements and messages on behalf of the university that are not aligned with staff; a need to maintain or increase services with limited resources to meet institutional objectives; financial models, budgets, enrollment strategies, and staff expectations. Additionally, external stakeholders influence, such as state legislators, governors, and policy enforcers may add tension points.

Tension 4: Navigating Workplace Culture and Generational Differences

The focus of the conversation will be on understanding different viewpoints, lived experiences, and a willingness to consider challenges to institutional norms. The tension to examine is the misalignment between different employees' perspectives on issues of workplace culture. AVPs need to navigate the tension between established norms and emerging trends. Themes may include work format, communication style, boundaries, pipelines to promotion, work-life balance, navigating mental health as a professional, and expectations related to DEI issues at their institutions.

Supporting Student Affairs to Prepare for Tensions of the Future

Many professionals in leadership positions evaluate themselves using popular tools such as Gallup's CliftonStrengths®, DiSC®, Myers-Briggs®, or other frameworks. I believe it is equally important for student affairs administrators to conduct a self-assessment of their abilities to navigate tension both for themselves and in their support of others.

Looking forward, it will be critical to routinely explore trends and tension that exist for student affairs supervisors and employees. Many trends and shifts may be predictable, such as those associated with political and legislative changes during high-profile election years or Supreme Court decisions. Others may be more obscure but significant: demographic shifts in the workforce and within student populations; geopolitical events or conflicts; institutional mergers and closures; the sustainability of funding models; new technological advances (e.g., generative AI); and the future of work. Questions about the salience of work modalities (e.g., hybrid, remote) and the impact of future generations on the expectations of higher education also merit consideration.

Additional research may be needed to explore different supervisor populations (e.g., director-level, first-time supervisors) to identify unique factors in their experiences. Moreover, considering the distinctive aspects of supervising graduate students and new professionals from "traditional pathways" versus "non-traditional" routes is warranted.

This tension-centered dialogue framework offers supervisors a practical toolkit to foster growth and realignment in a period of rapid change and transformation in higher education. The framework provides student affairs leaders with a blueprint to build resilient relationships to navigate forthcoming changes. Individuals will gain perspective and knowledge, supervisors will be better equipped to support their staff through tension, and institutions will benefit from

empowered mid-level leaders who can manage priorities across the organization. Most critically,

these dialogues will reinforce the importance of people as organizations evolve. As Lucy noted,

"...if you're not finding a way to prioritize your people, you will lose your people." By

proactively engaging in dialogue around emerging tensions, supervisors can build a sense of

shared purpose with their direct reports; teams can establish trust and understanding, and

employees can find value and satisfaction in their work in student affairs.

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Appendix A

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

1. **First and Last Name**, *Short answer text*

2. **Contact email address**, *Short answer text*

3. **Institution Nam**e, *Short answer text*

4. **Job Title**, *Short answer text*

5. **Gender,** *Short answer text*

6. **Functional Area/Department Name**, *Short answer text*

7. **Can you please provide a brief overview of your role and responsibilities as an administrator in student affairs**? *Paragraph*

8. **What degrees or certifications, and in what disciplines do you hold?** *Short answer or include a link to your LinkedIn profile.*

9. **How many years have you worked in higher education?** Student Affairs? As an AVP? *Short answer or include a link to your LinkedIn profile.*

10. **How many years have you been at your current institution?** *Short answer or include a link to your LinkedIn profile.*

11. **How many professionals do you directly supervise? Indirectly?** *Short answer text*

12. **Current job mode:** *Select one: full in-person, hybrid, WFH*

13. **Are you a member of a professional organization or association?** If yes, please list: *Yes/No with text box*

14. **Do you actively participate in regional or national conferences?** *Yes/No*

15. **Do you actively participate in local (institutional) or regional professional development opportunities?**

16. **What resources, if any, do you use to keep up on current trends in higher education, and student affairs (websites, podcasts, publications, etc.)?** *Short answer text*

17. **What is the name of a scholarly article, podcast, or other resource you have engaged with recently? List both the article and author, if possible.** *Short answer text*

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe the major challenges and opportunities you experience as a supervisor in student affairs? [*Understanding Current Climate in Student Affairs*]

2. What are the specific trends or changes that you have observed recently in higher education and student affairs, and how do they impact you as a supervisor? [*Understanding Current Climate in Student Affairs*]

3. How would you describe your supervisory style? [*Sense-Making/Supervisory Style*]

   a. Follow up for strategies or approaches as needed.

4. How do you make sense of the various data sources and information available to inform your decision-making regarding supporting your direct reports? [*Sense-Making/Supervisory Style*]

5. From your perspective, what are the significant employment-related issues faced by student affairs professionals currently? [*Employment Issues in Student Affairs*]

6. How do these employment issues or societal trends affect the ability to recruit and retain talented staff within student affairs? [*Employment Issues in Student Affairs*]

7. What strategies or approaches do you use to address these challenges effectively and foster a positive work environment for your direct reports? [*Sense-Making/Supervisory Style*]

8. How do you prioritize and balance the needs of staff members, institutional goals, and external trends when making employment-related decisions in student affairs? [*Sense-Making/Supervisory Style*]

9. What is missing/needed in mid/mid-senior leadership development to navigate and lead teams through changes in employment trends in student affairs? [*Sense-Making/Supervisory Style*]

10. How do you see your role as a supervisor in relation to HR or institutional policies related to impacting staff satisfaction and outcomes? [*Sense-Making/Supervisory Style*]

11. Looking ahead, what do you foresee as the potential challenges and opportunities in supervisory practices within student affairs? [*Sense-Making/Supervisory Style*]

Final Question: Is there any additional information or insights you would like to share regarding supervision, employment issues, and the current climate in higher education or student affairs?

Appendix C

Code Book

Parent Code	Child Code (if applicable)	Description
Sensemaking Properties	Identity	The role that identity plays in sensemaking
	Retrospection	Nature of hindsight in sensemaking
	Enactment	People act to make sense of ambiguous situations through interpretations and the construction of narratives.
	Other Properties	Represents other properties of sensemaking not specifically named above
Supervisory Style		Discussion of strategies or approaches related to supervision
Impact	Supervisor Employee Institution COVID-19	Discussion of impacts from various actors/issues on an employee
Role	Supervisor Employee Institution	Discussion of the role associated with action or experience
Trends		General directions or patterns related to a topic or experience
Employment	Recruitment Retention Resignation/Retirement Salary/Benefits Commitment	Discussion of various elements of the employment environment.

Organizational Frames	Structural Symbolic Human Resources Political	Descriptions referenced in Table 2
Data		Facts, statistics, or information used for interpretation and analysis
DEI		Discussion related to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion
Work-Life Balance	Burnout	Mental or physical exhaustion associated with work. Cynicism about the future of current work experience.
	Flexible Work	Opportunities to adjust work schedule or environment
	Mental Health	References to the mental health of professionals specifically related to employment
Pipeline		Pathway to the profession, including eligibility, credentials, and interest
Master's Preparation Programs		References to higher education master's preparation programs

Appendix D

Tool for Change: Sample Tensions

Prescriptive Pathway Tensions:

1. Administrative Identity vs. Relationships with Staff

2. Providing Support While Operating Within Constraints

3. Supporting Staff Needs vs. Supporting Institutional Priorities

4. Navigating Workplace Culture and Generational Differences

Responsive Pathway Tensions:

1. I do not agree with a public statement made by the president or senior administrator at our institution, and I am struggling to make peace with it.

2. I am frustrated by the inequities in benefits across our and other divisions when it comes to work-from-home approval.

3. The role post-pandemic is not the same as it was pre-COVID-19. I am unsure what this means for me.

4. My office culture is tense. The personalities seem to always be in conflict and do not seem to understand each other.

5. Enrollment is up 10% yet we have the same staffing and budgetary levels. What is the expectation of our services?

6. The IT department and colleagues in advancement can work from home. Why can't we?

7. Student affairs feels more about compliance and data than supporting students. I was not trained for this.

8. I am interested in staying at this institution, but there does not seem to be a pathway to promotion.

9. Student affairs is 9 am - 5 pm vs. student affairs is 24/7. Challenges between exempt and non-exempt statuses.

10. Other duties as assigned.

Appendix E

Tool for Change: Sample Reflection Questions and Journal Prompts

Tension:

[Articulate the tension to explore]

What triggered the feeling of tension?

[If possible, articulate how you identified this as a tension. What did you feel or experience?

What, if anything, changed?]

Reflection Prompts:

1) Where am I curious?

2) What might I not know?

3) Who can be a thought partner for me in this reflection?

4) What are alternative perspectives?

5) What is within or outside of my control?

Additional Prompts:

What are my priorities?

What are the institution's priorities?

Where do they differ? Where are they alike?

Where is the tension or disconnect?

What do I need to understand in the situation to move forward successfully?

Where am I left curious and needing to know more?

Who are those people that I can connect with to feel more confident in this area?

After reflection, if I cannot navigate the tension, what can I do next?

How is influence handled at my institution?

Who are the key decision-makers?

How do I work through the hierarchy in my role?

What are the institutional priorities?

How often do I have an opportunity to have my voice heard related to these priorities?

What is happening outside of my institution that impacts the work that I do?

How is my experience similar or similar to my supervisor's?

Why might we need or want to talk about that?

How do I think about my identity and my changing goals over time?

What are the current trends impacting my job?

What is within or outside of my control?

How do I feel about that? How can I work through that?

Am I okay not having this tension resolved?

Appendix F

Tool for Change: Sample Meeting Agenda

I.   **Review of Meeting Ground Rules**

    A. Use active listening skills

    B. Speak from personal experience, whenever possible. Avoid generalizations

    C. Be open to challenging a perspective respectfully (and being challenged.)

    D. [Add others, if appropriate]

II. **Introduction of the Tension** [Allow the employee to share the tension or misalignment they are experiencing. Do not interrupt or respond until they have shared what hope to share. Ask probing and prompting questions to ensure your understanding of their perspective before you offer your responses.]

III. **Conversation Guided by Reflection Prompts** [Select appropriate questions from Appendix E to guide the conversation. Make notes of opportunities for next steps, resources to aid in gaining clarity, and information you can share to help navigate through the tension.]

IV. **Wrap-Up Conversation and Next Steps** [If realignment has not been reached, plan for further reflection and a second meeting. Set a goal to connect with any additional resources or conversation partners, if applicable. If a satisfactory resolution has been reached, plan for a follow-up at a future meeting to check in.]

V.   **Evaluate the Experience**