

DISSERTATION

STORIES OF TRANSITION BETWEEN GRADUATE PREPARATION PROGRAMS AND
COMMUNITY-COLLEGE STUDENT AFFAIRS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

STORIES OF TRANSITION BETWEEN GRADUATE PREPARATION PROGRAMS AND COMMUNITY-COLLEGE STUDENTS

The purpose of this study is to provide a basis for understanding how new student-affairs professionals transition from their graduate preparation programs and into community-college work within zero to 3 years after having completed their master's degree. The study was guided by three specific research questions: (a) How do individuals experience the transition from graduate-school preparation programs and community-college student-affairs work as two separate, but related, cultures?; (b) What external factors facilitate new student-affairs professionals transitions' from graduate school into community-college work?; and (c) What internal or personal factors support this transition between graduate school and community-college work? This study was constructed using two primary frameworks: community colleges as a subculture (Sebald, 1975) within the American higher education system, and Schlossberg's (1981, 2008) transition theory and 4S system, which identify factors across internal and external domains that support individuals as they experience change in their lives. Through a qualitative, narrative-inquiry approach that highlighted the lived experiences and personal stories of five individuals, key findings describe specific areas of perceived misalignment (broad roles, localization, organizational structure and dynamics) and an emergent colloquialism ("especially at community colleges") that described differences between the two separate, but related, cultures. Participants' stories also revealed the influence of graduate school, sense of community, "doing work that matters," and situational factors as supportive of their transitions. Implications

for practice include strengthening both professional pipelines to community-college student-affairs work and graduate program design.

DEDICATION

I never thought I would pursue a PhD.

Then again, 17 years ago, I was surprised to be starting a master's-degree program.

Yet here I am.

This dissertation is dedicated to my son, Locke. Of course, many people have supported me in this adventure; and yet he has been the most surprising support of all. I hope that the twists and turns in my life story inspire him to also “say yes” when the right doors open.

Locke, your father and I began fertility treatments during my first semester in this doctoral program. Although this sounds like a terrible combination of dreams colliding all at once, we did so because we anticipated it could take years to bring you into this world.

Life, as I have come to understand, had an unexpected twist in store. I entered my second semester as a doctoral student with you in my belly and due just before the end of that spring semester. I worked ahead and had only one paper still to submit at the time we drove to the hospital in the middle of the night.

I finished that paper 3 days after you came home with us. I aimed to be an amazing mom to you while also working and staying the course with this degree. I had wonderful people in my life who helped me do just that.

Today, you are almost 4. You will likely not remember mommy writing, researching, and spending all the time I did away from you during these past few years. But I hope this accomplishment is a reminder that you, too, can take the twists and turns and end up with more than you could have ever anticipated.

Locke, your mom has built a career, intellect, sense of self, and a terminal degree from a very early commitment to help the world *be better*—to see the world through the eyes of others, and to challenge systems that keep individuals from achieving their dreams. Having you, while working on this credential and also serving my field as a vice president and chief student-affairs officer, has deepened my understanding of the pushes and pulls students experience when they juggle work, school, and being a great parent. You have made me better at my work, a more motivated student, and a better human, and you have given me an outlook on the world that is forever changed.

While I know, today, that you are worried about “mommy becoming a doctor” because you fear it means I can give you shots like your physician, do not worry—I cannot. But I hope that I *can* show, and have shown, you that curiosity, learning, and using your talents to make the world a better place is, without a doubt, in your blood.

I love you,

Mom/Marisa Vernon White

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION	ivi
LIST OF KEYWORDS	ix
DEFINITION OF TERMS	ix
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Research Problem	3
Significance of the Study	6
Research Questions	7
Delimitations.....	8
Assumptions and Limitations	9
Researcher's Perspective	11
Conclusion	13
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	15
Today's Community Colleges: A Unique Landscape	16
Multiple Missions	16
Localization.....	17
Challenges in Measuring Outcomes	19
Centering Social-Justice Roots	21
Understanding Subculture.....	23
Community Colleges As a Subculture of Higher Education.....	24
Role of Student Affairs in Today's Community Colleges.....	26
Community Colleges and Graduate Preparation Programs	28
Curriculum and Competencies.....	28
Experiential Learning and Mentoring.....	35
Graduate School to Profession: A Transition.....	39
Understanding School-to-Work Experiences.....	40
The Transition Framework.....	42
Schlossberg's Transition Theory: A Framework Within Which to Explore This Transition	42
Situation	45
Self	46

Support.....	48
Strategy	49
Literature Review and Invisibility: A Perspective	51
Literature Review Recap	52
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	54
Research Approach and Rationale	55
Participants.....	56
Recruitment.....	57
Data Collection	59
Interview Process.....	62
Trustworthiness.....	69
Validity.....	70
Methodology Overview	71
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS.....	72
Participant Demographics.....	73
Stories of Transition.....	75
Ematha: Called to Serve Students and Community.....	75
Hillary: A Slow Build Toward Community-College Passion	83
Emily: A Regional Campus Experience Ignites a Spark.....	90
Katy: Coordinating the Help Everyone Needs.....	98
Isabella: Finding Comfort in a Community-College Role.....	106
Emerging Themes	111
Experience of Community Colleges As Culturally Unique.....	112
Broad and Adaptive Roles	112
Localization.....	116
“Especially at Community Colleges”	118
Interacting With Organizational Dynamics.....	119
External Factors That Support Transition.....	123
Situational Factors Influential to Transition	124
Finding Community	127
Internal Factors That Support Transition	129
Graduate Preparation As a Frame for Meaning Making	130
Doing Work That Matters	133

In Review	136
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	138
Comparing Current Findings and Previous Literature.....	140
Experiencing Separate but Related Cultures.....	140
Experiencing Broad, Adaptive Student-Affairs Roles	142
Experiencing Localization As a Unique Cultural Element	146
“Especially at Community Colleges”: A Cultural Boundary	148
Experiencing Unique Organizational Structure and Dynamics	149
External Factors That Support Transition: Situation and Support	153
Situations: The Impact of Timing, Chance, and Other External Factors	154
Supports: Finding Community.....	157
Internal Factors That Support Transition: Self and Strategy	161
Self: Social Justice and Doing Work That Matters	161
Strategy: Graduate School As a Frame for Meaning Making.....	165
Implications for Practice	173
Implications for Community Colleges.....	173
Implications for Graduate Preparation Programs	177
Implications for Higher Education Culture Overall.....	180
Future Areas of Inquiry	182
Summary	186
Researcher Reflection	189
REFERENCES	192
APPENDIX A	199
APPENDIX B	204
APPENDIX C	205
APPENDIX D	211
APPENDIX E	213

LIST OF KEYWORDS

community college

graduate program

student affairs

narrative inquiry

higher education

subculture

transition

preparation

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In Stone's (1997) book, *The Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision-Making*, the author confidently proclaims, "There is no escape: to name is to take a stand. And if naming is political, there can be no neutral facts, no pure description to convey to others neutral information" (p. 308). As further indicated throughout the literature review in the current study, language is also one of the factors that builds borders and walls around certain experiences and cultures, creating differences between mainstream cultures and the subcultures that emerge within (Sebal, 1975). For this reason, defining the terms used throughout this study is a foundational and intentional act, illuminating specific components of both the American higher education ecosystem and subsets found within it.

Access. Colloquially used in community colleges to describe the recruitment, entry, and enrollment processes. Access, when used in the context of community-college students, refers specifically to students' ability to connect to, enter, and take advantage of the institution and its services.

Code switching. This term, used by a participant, can be more broadly understood as shifting between languages, sentence structure, linguistic style, or cultural norms to align to one's environment (Auer, 1998).

Community college. Associates' colleges and those that grant at least one bachelor's degree, but more than 50% associate's degrees (Carnegie Basic Classification, 2019).

Community colleges are also characterized as localized institutions that offer the first 2 years of a bachelor's degree, vocational training, developmental education, workforce preparation programs, and community programming (Hirt, 2006).

Completion. Completion can be used to refer to specific outcomes defined by the institution or an external stakeholder (e.g. state funding entity, local community, or accrediting body), or referring to degree or certificate completion. Because community-college student enrollment patterns do not mirror the standard cohorts tracked within universities, American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) most recent report on community college completion notes "there is no standard measure of program completion" (AACC, 2020, p. 10). This, AACC, and community colleges themselves, use a variety of frameworks and methodologies to report completion.

Cognitive culture map. Sackmann (1992) noted that culture comprises of a map of shared understanding (cognition) among its members, including language, approaches used to resolve challenges, practices used to navigate the environment, and a shared perspective on why and how things happen as they do.

Credit misalignment. Commonly used in community-college academic advising settings, this term refers to challenges in transferring and applying credits seamlessly from one institutional type to another. Baldwin (2017) describes this misalignment as an area for improvement related to student mobility within higher education as a macrosystem.

Graduate preparation program. "Specific course work that could be gleaned from these broad content areas might include historical and philosophical foundations of higher education and student affairs, student development theory, student characteristics and college impact studies, counseling, student-affairs administration, assessment and research, and experiential learning" (Herdlein, 2004, p. 56).

New professional. For the purpose of this study, a new professional is defined as an individual within zero to 3 years into their professional role in student affairs. This definition is

applied based on Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) work on socialization, which indicates that personal experiences are most intense when an individual first crosses an organizational boundary.

Onboarding. A participant in this study referred to her student-affairs functional area as "Orientation and onboarding". In this study, onboarding is an alternative term used to describe the programs and processes that support individuals, in this case students, as they enter and enroll at a community college.

Othering. This term refers to the process by which an individual or system marginalizes a specific group due to perceived differences and characteristics, and is a phenomenon individuals are encouraged to recognize and combat to increase unity and allyship (Mohr & Hoover, 2020).

Stop out. Stopping out is another phrase used to describe a student's withdrawal from a college or university. Typically, this term refers to the action as a temporary one a student may take, but with the intent to return or re-engage in the future. The Merriam-Webster (2021) definition of this word specifically refers to this action within the higher education environment.

Student-affairs professional. Broadly speaking, student-affairs professionals are individuals who coordinate, provide, or lead services that support student development within a higher education setting (Hirt, 2006). Nevarez and Wood (2010) categorized the broad scope of student-affairs practice, breaking this work into three subsets that group similar functional areas of the field found at an institutional level: *technical* (supporting enrollment and registration), *campus life* (engagement and student development), and *nexus* (supporting academic experiences and functions).

Subculture. Collective identity created by shared jargon, language, norms, values, and community that the larger culture cannot or does not provide (Sebald, 1975).

Transition. “Transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a gateway for upward mobility in American society, and community colleges are not only well positioned to serve as this door, but also have been entrusted with this role over the last century (Heelan & Mellow, 2017). The earliest structures of American higher education stemmed from elitism, with limited access often achieved through family legacy, wealth, and political and trade relationships (Wilder, 2014). Although it evolved over time, the architecture of higher education was erected from these roots, its scaffolding braided with racism, “othering,” elitism, Eurocentrism, colonization, social stratification, and exclusion (Wilder, 2014). This exclusion served as the catalyst for the creation of a parallel, yet counter, system designed to educate students from lower socioeconomic status underserved by other forms of higher education. Now a subset of modern American higher education, community colleges fulfill an important and historical social contract, representing an accessible pathway to degree attainment (Heelan & Mellow, 2017).

After the establishment and accreditation of Joliet Junior College in 1901, individual communities identified similar opportunities to support place-bound or underserved students in their pursuit of workforce training or education. Today, more than six million students are enrolled in more than 1,050 2-year institutions and represent 41% of all undergraduate college students in the United States (AACC, 2019). Nationally, community-college demographics reflect diversity in race, socioeconomic status, age, parental status, and citizenship status. Nearly half of all community-college students identify as non-White, and racially or ethnically diverse students are more likely than White students to begin their college experience at a community college (Shapiro et al., 2017). More than one-third of community-college students receive the

federal Pell Grant, an indicator of financial need (AACC, 2019). Today, nearly 90% of Americans live within 25 miles of a community college, thus creating a vast infrastructure that has increased access to higher education for millions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). One can certainly argue that today's community colleges have lived up to their historical mission and, indeed, that they facilitate equity in access to higher education.

Even though they offer a counter option to elite and land-grant institutions, community colleges still reflect many of the same flawed, inequitable systems from which America's higher education emerged. Architectural elements, such as curriculum and transfer alignment with universities, policy adoption from 4-year universities, a shared federal student-aid system, and similar accreditation standards, mean community colleges still operate from the original foundation from which all American higher education has been shaped (Wilder, 2014). With tensions among these tangled systemic roots, and their social contract with American society, community colleges are unique institutions in which broad missions, social justice, assessment, measurable outcomes, and ethics sometimes collide.

Although they are integral to the fabric of our nation's modern higher education system, community colleges represent a unique sector, given their localized roots, multiple missions, and open-door approach to college access. Since the early 2000s and the start of reform efforts, community colleges have centered student learning and support as foundational, shifting away from an earlier paradigm that placed high focus on access, enrollment, and transactional services (Tull et al., 2015). To adequately support the needs of such diverse stakeholders, community colleges have placed a renewed emphasis on student experience, outcomes, and overall student success, all of which rest, at least in part, upon excellence in student-affairs administration and support services (Knight, 2014).

Student-affairs professionals, broadly, are responsible for the services and support infrastructure, aiding in the development and success of students within higher education (Helfgot, 2005; Navarez & Wood, 2010). As a profession, student affairs is built upon a foundation grounded in student-development theory, making student-affairs professionals a central part of many modern community colleges' efforts to individualize services and support the achievement of diverse career and academic goals (Baston, 2018; Helfgot, 2005). However, community colleges seemingly work from a deficit when it comes to the preparation of new professionals to address the challenges unique to their students and institutional contexts. Student-affairs work within community colleges requires a unique skillset and challenges new administrators to adapt the skills they have learned in graduate school, which are generally developed to understand and guide student development in traditional, 4-year, higher education settings (Latz et al., 2017). Deepening our understanding of the factors that support transition between graduate-school preparation and entry into community-college settings can illuminate gaps between these environments, and also opportunities through which further alignment can occur.

Many community-college professionals enter the field of student affairs prior to completion of a graduate degree (Hirt, 2006; Tull et al., 2015). However, in this study I specifically focused on the role of master's-level student affairs, higher education leadership, or educational-administration preparation programs in preparing individuals to enter community-college work.

Statement of the Research Problem

To be sure, community-college student-affairs leaders must take responsibility for cultivating, training, mentoring, and leading within the field itself. However, unique institutional

factors contribute to variance in organizational structure, work environment, and stakeholder influence, creating differences between student-affairs professional practice within 4-year and 2-year institutional contexts (Hirt, 2006; Tull et al., 2015). Graduate-level preparation programs are an important component of professional identity development, providing training, mentoring, membership in professional organizations, and opportunities for work-based learning as individuals envision themselves facilitating student-affairs work (Pittman & Foubert, 2016). However, when we critically examine basic tenets of graduate student-affairs preparation programs through a community-college lens, gaps begin to appear in foundational literature, theoretical frameworks, and opportunities to diversify practicum experiences.

Reflecting a further positioning of community colleges as separate and unique entities, this institutional type is underrepresented within higher education research, discourse, and scholarly journals compared to its 4-year counterparts (Floyd et al., 2016; Kelly-Kleese, 2004; Townsend et al., 2005). In addition, a review of 40 years of the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice (CCJRP)* illuminated a specific language within community-college writing, with unique terms such as *student success*, *articulation*, *access*, and *workforce development* prevalent in scholarship about this sector of American higher education (Floyd et al., 2016). Invisibility of community colleges within literature, and also variance in topics across sectors, limit dialogue about the nuances, trends, and challenges that impact this important access point within the larger higher education system.

With these limitations in place, how then might graduate students in student-affairs preparation become exposed to the field within a community-colleges context? Mentoring and experiential learning are two structures that support the transition between student-affairs graduate programs and entry into the field (Hornak et al., 2016; Liddell et al., 2014). One

quantitative, survey-based study found practicum experiences to be effective experiences that promote learning and mastery, especially in the areas of leadership, application of theory, and career preparation, though 42% of participants had completed practical experiences at the institution in which their graduate program was housed (Young, 2019). With most student-affairs master's programs offered through 4-year institutions, a lack of exposure to practical experiences within a 2-year setting may limit students' exploration of such opportunities and also could also impact their transition into community-college work.

Community-college underrepresentation and separation within the broader higher education discourse and leadership preparation is akin to what Sebold (1975) defined as a *subculture*, or a structure defined by shared values, norms, lingo, and sense of solidarity not fully provided or supported by the dominant, mainstream culture in which it exists. When we view community-college work as a subculture of the broader higher education landscape, the experiences of student-affairs professionals who transition from graduate preparation programs into an underrepresented setting become of particular interest.

Community colleges represent a subculture of higher education, as reflected by its nuanced missions, open-access structure, social-justice roots, and varied student-affairs experiences (Hirt, 2006). As emerging student-affairs professionals feel tensions between their academic and professional experiences, most notably those pertaining to gaps between university and community-college-focused cultures, these individuals likely experience a shift that prompts strategic action or resolution. For professionals who explore and ultimately enter the community-college subculture, these experiences represent transitions in and of themselves.

Little is known about the experiences of graduates who enter the community-college sector as professionals (Latz et al., 2017), and even less is known about how students in graduate

preparation programs identify opportunities within community-college settings, determine their congruency with personal or career goals, and begin to transition into the context itself. As previously mentioned, community colleges enroll 41% of undergraduate students in American higher education, and thus are significant access points within the larger system (AACC, 2019). Because community colleges are the sector of higher education specifically rooted in providing access to underserved populations, the lack of formal preparation for student-affairs work in this context may have an impact on their knowledge, commitment, and connection to the community-college mission. In turn, a lack of preparation at the graduate level may continue to reinforce equity gaps that exist in American higher education as a whole, positioning those with the least amount of context-specific training in the most diverse and openly accessible sector of higher education (Latz et al., 2017). This study's purpose was to enable an understanding of the transition experience for students from graduate preparation programs into the unique subculture of community-college student-affairs work.

Significance of the Study

Community colleges, as organizations, are unique contexts in which student-affairs work is situated. And yet, community colleges are underrepresented in the foundations in which graduate preparation programs are built, such as literature (Floyd et al., 2016; Kelly-Kleese, 2004; Townsend et al., 2005) and mainstream professional organizations. These colleges serve populations who do not necessarily align with foundational student-development theories. Understanding both how graduates of student-affairs programs transition into a context that is underrepresented in the formal training environments, and also the factors that helped the graduates adapt to this environment, may help to illuminate training and opportunities to support this transition for future emerging professionals.

Largely, student-affairs work within the community-college sector requires a unique skillset and challenges new administrators to think critically about the theories, practices, and concepts that are generally associated with the 4-year sector, the field's dominant lens through which administrators are trained to look (Hirt, 2006; Latz et al., 2017). Exposure to community-college-centered coursework and experiential learning opportunities helps graduate students understand the purpose, mission, and role of community colleges within higher education's larger ecosystem (Royer et al., 2016). In addition, personal factors such as students' beliefs and values, and their congruence with certain environments, also aid in professional identity development (Hirschy et al., 2015). Deepening our understanding of the internal and external factors that support the transition between graduate-school preparation and entry into community-college settings can illuminate both gaps between these environments and opportunities through which further alignment can occur.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how new community-college student-affairs professionals transition from experiences in their graduate preparation programs and into this subculture of higher education. The research questions used for this study are

- (a) How do individuals experience the transition between graduate-school preparation programs and community-college student-affairs work as two separate, but related, cultures?
- (b) What external factors facilitate new student-affairs professionals' transition from graduate school into community-college work?
- (c) What internal or personal factors support this transition between graduate-school and community-college work?

Delimitations

The sample for this study included graduates of student-affairs preparation programs who entered a professional role within a community college immediately following or up to 3 years postgraduation. Because this study focused on the transition between graduate-program environment and community college, centering on the new professional experience placed focus on unique elements within both individual contexts and the bridge between them. I applied this delimitation so that I could identify and understand participants' personal and recent transition experiences. In addition, socialization theory, which assumes that an individual assesses personal and values congruence with an environment within the first several years of movement across an organizational or professional boundary (Cooman et al., 2009), supported the scope of inquiry for this study. Although this study was not necessarily focused on the fit or values congruence between employees and their work environment, the results suggest that individuals may experience the greatest personal and transitional experiences early on and before they are fully integrated into the organization. Both for recall purposes and to center the dialogue on the transitional period between graduate school and community-college professional work, I set a parameter of zero to 3 years as a delimitation in the study.

Student-affairs professionals, including those who work in community colleges, enter their roles through a variety of professional and experiential pathways such as student employment, counseling programs, faculty appointments, or other academic disciplines (Hirt, 2006). Although students from these pathways enter community-college student affairs, in this study I sought to understand the experience of professionals bridging between a specific preparation structure and a subculture of its connected profession. For this reason, I narrowly

focused on graduate preparation programs with curricular alignment to higher education leadership, student affairs, or postsecondary educational administration in this study.

I note that Hirt (2006) touched upon the unique subcultures and nuances of student-affairs work in a number of contexts, including liberal-arts colleges, religiously affiliated colleges, research universities, Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), tribal colleges, and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). In addition, Bok (2013) nodded to growing commercialization of higher education as a result of shifting markets and highlighted the manner in which college and university service models and institutional culture have evolved in light of increased digitalization, commercialization, and student preferences. The Carnegie classification system, designed to categorize and reflect differences in institutional type within the United States, includes seven major categories of institutions, with subcategories based on specialization, location, and other characteristics (Carnegie, 2019). To be sure, a variety of institutional subsets can be found within the American higher education system, and these subsets reflect characteristics that support diversity of mission, structure, and culture. Although these subcultures add diversity to the fabric of our American higher education system, the scope of this particular study was focused on the unique elements of student affairs specifically within the community-college subculture.

Assumptions and Limitations

Constructivism, the selected research paradigm for this study, assumes knowledge is constructed through contextual factors, culture, and individual meaning-making experiences (Jones et al., 2014), and that “reality is socially constructed and variables are complex, interwoven, and difficult to measure” (Glesne, 2011, p. 9). New professionals are individuals with internal characteristics and strategies to navigate changes; they interact with systems such

as graduate programs, the macrosystem of American higher education, and the institutions in which they work. A subjective research paradigm thus accounts for the layered tapestry of individuals' experiences of transition. Qualitative research grounded in constructivism "invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation for reinterpretation" (Crotty, 1998, p. 51). To invite and center open, individual stories of transition between graduate preparation and community-college student affairs, a narrative inquiry approach was the selected research methodology for this study. One limitation of narrative inquiry, however, is that the data are descriptive of the participant's individual story. Thus, this approach is subjective in nature and cannot be generalized to a larger population (Bhattacharya, 2017). Similarly, the influence of race and gender were not specifically examined in this study, given the research questions' did not specifically seek to understand the relationship between these specific identity-based characteristics and the subject of inquiry.

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory was a primary framework I applied in this study. This theory illuminates the *situational*, *self*, *support*, and *strategy* factors present in one's movement from one environment, life stage, or context to the next. Schlossberg (2011) noted that "people differ in how they cope with what seems to be the same transition and often cope well in one transition but feel ineffective in the next" (p. 160). So while the applicability of a framework provides a lens from which to examine and understand the lived experiences of the participants, it is important to note that each of these four factors can be highly personalized. In addition, because sampling for this study identified *graduate programs in student affairs* against American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) program directories, available information about the formal inclusion of community-college content, curricula, or experiential opportunities within each program was

limited. Thus, this study relied on participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of their graduate programs' inclusion of community colleges as a focus area or accessible environment for experiential learning or exposure. These assumptions limit the generalizability of the study results to the broader population of graduate students, graduate program design, or the experiences of new professionals in community-college student affairs.

Although student-affairs professionals are united by a foundation of student-development theories, literature, and role within their institutions, the type and level of distinct roles may contribute to how individuals directly experience community-college culture. Community colleges are still relatively agile, given their fast-paced nature, yet they have become increasingly hierarchical in organizational structure as they have matured (Kuk, 2015). Although community-college student-affairs professionals often wear many proverbial hats (Hirt, 2006) and often work across and with multiple departments (Kuk, 2015), their particular levels within this hierarchy may place them closer or further from the epicenter of community-college subculture. For this reason, I note one's position level as a possible limitation of this study because individual experiences cannot necessarily be applied across the hierarchy within the field itself.

Finally, given the elements of natural human interaction present within narrative-inquiry methodology, dynamics during the interview process may have influenced the candor with which participants shared their lived experiences, thought processes, and perceptions. Specific efforts to establish reliability are addressed in Chapter 3, but these considerations also inform accepted limitations of the study.

Researcher's Perspective

I contribute to both the administration and scholarship of American community colleges as a student-affairs practitioner with 13 years of leadership experience working in four open-

access institutions. In 2019, I became the Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Services at a national, award-winning, dynamic, student-ready, community college. My lens has been shaped by leadership experience at three nationally recognized Ohio community colleges, each denoted as Achieving the Dream (ATD) Leader Colleges of Distinction for active engagement in national and state efforts to close racial and socioeconomic equity gaps in student success. Two of these colleges have been named among the Aspen Institute's Top 150 Community Colleges in 2020, and my current institution has received two of the nation's top honors for community-college success: the prestigious 2020 Leah Meyer Austin Award, and First in the Nation for Student Success recognition through the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) in 2018. In my career thus far, I have witnessed firsthand the profound impact of a community-college education on individuals, families, and communities. I believe community colleges are the open door to higher education, and that we, as their leaders, are stewards of our students' lives and public trust.

I was connected to the higher education administration and student-personnel graduate program at Kent State University in 2004, and this experience fundamentally shifted the trajectory of my life. I had anticipated a career working in academic advising at a 4-year, residential university much like the one I had attended; instead, I was drawn to the innovative, access-driven environment of an open-enrollment, commuter institution. Since taking my first professional job in an open-enrollment regional campus, my career and passion has been centered on providing affordable, equitable, barrier-free access to higher education. Regional-campus and community colleges are rooted in the belief that every individual deserves the opportunity to access a college education, and this value structure has cultivated a subculture that is sometimes rendered invisible within the higher education system.

Currently positioned as economically comfortable, I am keenly aware of the perspective I have developed as a result of my social class, and how that status may create gaps in my ability to view the world through the eyes of the students I serve. As an administrator, I experience community colleges as dynamic environments that open doors to upward mobility; but I acknowledge that our students may experience economic, personal, and academic barriers as they pursue their dreams. This reality motivates me to examine and consider the student experience, and create environments in which others on my team seek to do the same. As a leader in this work, I actively find ways to connect emerging professionals to community-college work, knowing that today's regional campuses and community colleges need talented, forward-thinking professionals to carry on their missions, facilitate equitable access to higher education, and drive student success.

Conclusion

Community colleges can be thought of as a unique subset of the American higher education system, created to expand access for those excluded by traditional institutions of American higher education (Heelan & Mellow, 2017). To navigate their unique environments and support the nuances of their work, those working within community colleges have developed internal networks, language, and resources to support work that differs from that found within 4-year institutions (Helfgot, 2005; Hirt, 2006). These adaptations are representative of the sociological concept and definition of *subculture* (Sebald, 1975), and may contribute to gaps in the research, student-development theories, and curriculum, and in the experiential learning opportunities that connect and prepare emerging student-affairs professionals for community-college work. In this study, I have applied narrative inquiry to explore how individuals who have recently transitioned into community-college student affairs from graduate programs aligned

with their field, and I have sought to illuminate points of tension, misalignment, and adaptive factors present within the transition from one environment to the next.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Education serves as a gateway for upward mobility in American society, and community colleges have been entrusted with this role over the past century (Heelan & Mellow, 2017). Community colleges now provide an access point for nearly half of all students entering the American system of higher education and serve individuals who reflect rich diversity across race, socioeconomic status, age, employment, gender, and family structure (AACC, 2020). Today, more than six million students representing 41% of all undergraduate college students in the United States are enrolled in more than 1,050 2-year institutions (AACC, 2020). As microcosms of American society, nearly half of all community-college students identify as non-White; and students of color are more likely than White students to begin their college experience at a community college (Shapiro et al., 2017). More than one-third of community-college students receive the federal Pell Grant, an indicator of financial need (AACC, 2020). Today's community colleges, which represent a vast infrastructure that has increased access to higher education for millions, have lived up to their historical mission.

Even as they are integral to our nation's modern system of higher education, community colleges also represent a unique sector, given their localized roots, evolving missions, and open-door approach to college access. Within the past two decades, community colleges have increasingly moved from enrollment-driven and transactional approaches to focus on student access and student-centered learning as critical in measuring their unique contributions (Tull et al., 2015). To adequately support the needs of such diverse stakeholders, this sector has experienced a renewed emphasis on student experience, outcomes, and overall student success, all of which rest, at least in part, upon excellence in student-affairs administration and support

services (Knight, 2014). Because community colleges reflect the sector of higher education specifically rooted in providing access to underserved populations, underprepared professionals in these institutions may exhibit gaps when it comes to their knowledge, commitment, and connection to the community-college mission. In turn, the resulting lack of preparation for community-college students at the graduate level may continue to reinforce the equity gaps that exist in American higher education as a whole, positioning those with the least amount of context-specific training in the most diverse and openly accessible sector of higher education (Latz et al., 2016).

Today's Community Colleges: A Unique Landscape

Although they are highly localized in terms of their roots, community colleges are part of the larger ecosystem of American higher education; thus, they are particularly vulnerable to changes and gaps in the national and global marketplaces. Their responsiveness to such changes and their rapid evolution have resulted in a dynamic and agile infrastructure that supports student access to higher education (Hirt, 2006). It is important both to illuminate and to understand the unique characteristics of today's community colleges in order to prepare student-affairs professionals for work within their walls.

Multiple Missions

Because of their localized roots, multiple stakeholders, and rapid development throughout the twentieth century, community colleges are ever-changing organizations that are susceptible to mission misalignment. Drucker (1973) introduced *missioning* as a management approach in the late twentieth century; and although many community colleges have operated from a loose set of historically established values, some institutions have adopted this business strategy (Ayers, 2017). Economic ups and downs, community workforce needs, and changes in public

attitudes are all factors that can influence priorities within these institutions, and over time mission statements have begun to ground their organizational direction (Ayers, 2017).

Though areas such as students' transfer between institutions, workforce training, developmental education, adult literacy, English as a second language (ESL), and community enrichment are among community colleges' broad offerings, these aspects can be grouped into three distinct mission categories, which include transfer, workforce development, and developmental education (Desai, 2012). Each category reflects an access point that supports students' pursuit of specific, yet diverse, educational goals. The very nature of community-college culture calls for exemplary, student-centered approaches to service and support. For example, student-affairs professionals and leaders working within community colleges must simultaneously juggle the needs of students across all three distinct mission categories to ensure equitable service for a diverse range of individual student goals (Hirt, 2006).

Localization

As organizations that have grown from local roots, community colleges are challenged to act as participants in the collective national dialogue while they evolve institution-level infrastructures that can support continued mission-specific alignment at the local level. Despite support through networks such as the AACC and Achieving the Dream, much of the effort to improve outcomes in community-college education falls to the institutions themselves. The strong impact of local funding structures, regional workforce alignment, and community needs creates nuances that challenge a unified understanding of how community colleges are organized, understood, and led.

Regarding funding structures, community colleges are set apart from other types of higher education institutions. Community colleges often draw from district tax bases that drive

high levels of local accountability. Askin (2007) examined differences across community colleges funded by state-only appropriations and those dually funded through both the state and local tax base. Although differences in outcomes were not found to be statistically significant, student services and programs designed to meet community needs were more prevalent in institutions receiving local funding, suggesting that community colleges adapt to the needs of the stakeholders who support them (Askin, 2007). This finding supports Palomba and Banta's (1999) view of higher education's threefold purpose in society (i.e., education, research, and community/public service). Askin also noted that community colleges prioritize community/public-service contributions among their core services. Organizationally, this strong connection to local influence may challenge some institutions to reallocate resources, adopt new practices, or shift focus to meet broader higher education market demands (Askin, 2007).

Reliance upon local tax revenue or resources means that professionals working within community colleges must not only navigate institutional culture, but also keep their fingers on the pulse of the local communities, neighborhoods, and economies that drive institutional development. In a critique of higher education as a societal system, Rojas (2015) noted a disconnected relationship between higher education and social movements, referring to a "decoupling between academic movements and their non-academic allies" (p. 272). However, when both the institution and its surrounding public view the college as the catalyst for responsive and visionary change, the college cannot remain insular or decoupled from its local context. As Hirt (2006) described the community-college environment, "every person or organization in the service area is a potential client of the community college" (p. 136). This is especially true when one is considering the broad and sometimes competing reaches of community colleges into the workforce, local K-through-12 partnerships, connections to regional

universities, lifelong learning programs, and community recreation (Desai, 2012). Because community colleges are highly localized, these characteristics may challenge the curriculum of graduate-level higher education leadership programs that are committed to teach about the administrative and organizational structures of this sector.

Challenges in Measuring Outcomes

Educational credentialing is central to community colleges, which are first and foremost higher education institutions. Barringer and Jaquette (2018) classified roughly 1,000 community colleges into four types of students based on the credentials awarded between 1987 and 2012: (a) less than associates; (b) primarily academic/transfer; (c) evenly split between transfer and career; and (d) professional associates. Despite their broadening scope, the majority (64%) of community colleges had not changed the types of credentials offered over a 25-year period, indicating that there had been little shift in the educational focus areas at the institution level (Barringer & Jaquette, 2018).

Like other types of institutions, having a primary focus on credentialing subjects community colleges to measurable evaluation, such as student outcomes, credential attainment, and student learning. However, defining success in an open-enrollment environment also is no easy task, and community colleges are challenged to provide the programs that support a wide range of educational goals. Heelan and Mellow (2017) have provided context to this tension:

Multiple measures provide evidence of the kinds of support community-college students require. Low levels of academic competence among recent high school graduates require community colleges, as open access institutions, to focus attention on supporting skill development to provide foundational mathematics, reading, writing, and English comprehension in order for students to succeed in college. (p. 20)

Completion rates are important considerations in the open-access environment, yet community colleges cannot lose sight of those individuals within their communities for whom

the front door may still remain out of reach. Despite providing access to those underserved by other sectors of higher education, community colleges produce low rates of completion and have not necessarily closed equity gaps in degree attainment: for example, a 33% and 29% 6-year graduation rate among Hispanic and Black students, respectively, compared to 45% of White students who begin at community colleges (Shapiro et al., 2017). Even though many community-college students access higher education with aspirations to transfer to a 4-year institution and complete a bachelor's degree, this pathway is not necessarily clear or without challenges. Credit misalignment (i.e., inconsistencies related to course transfer and acceptance between community colleges and 4-year institutions), unclear academic pathways, and disjointed advising contribute to low transfer rates, and university and the transition of community-college students between systems in nonlinear ways (Baldwin, 2017). In fact, a review of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data indicated that 38% of students entering 4-year universities transferred into community colleges, following a pattern known as *reverse transfer*, and that 37% of community-college students who transferred made a lateral move to another community college (Baldwin, 2017). The NSC also examined outcomes for the 2010 community-college cohort, using a national perspective to capture their associate's or bachelor's degree completion at either the originating institution, another 2-year college, or after transfer to a 4-year university. At the conclusion of the 6-year period, only 29% of students who began at a community college earned a college degree within 3 years, and only 39% completed within 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2017). These enrollment patterns, and the need to have the capability to measure successful outcomes, further complicate the work of community colleges. This is especially true for student-affairs professionals who aid students in academic planning to meet the initial stated outcomes when students are first enrolling in the community college. As institutions that are specifically

designed to support the individualized educational goals of exceptionally diverse students, community-college student-affairs professionals must not lose sight of the larger societal mission that grounds their daily work.

Centering Social-Justice Roots

Given the historical foundation of community colleges in America and current enrollment demographics, we can view social justice as an important component of institutional identity. The presence of these roots, however, challenges community colleges to think differently about how to support upward mobility with higher education as a larger ecosystem. Critics of community colleges have described tension regarding mission and performance, noting that providing access to education, without an equal focus on student completion of coursework and credentials, may position institutions in complex ethical dilemmas that require careful navigation (Ingram & Morrissey, 2009), or, when considered as a macro-level system, as one of injustice that reinforces racial or socioeconomic stratification within American higher education (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015).

To be sure, professionals working in higher education's dominant, university culture certainly grapple with this balance between mission and outcomes, as well. In an open-access environment, however, student-affairs professionals balance their institutions' social contract with society and achieving outcomes that show their effectiveness in contributing to educational attainment. The specific missions and values from which community colleges have been built add complexity and uniqueness to the institutional landscape and the challenge to community-college professionals to exert careful, ethical, and equity-informed decision-making. Unless outcomes elevate underserved individuals to the same level as those who access higher education through other, more selective means, critics of community colleges may continue to view them

as further contributing to the stratification of American society. Community colleges are, of course, an entryway to a larger ecosystem of higher education. However, the manner in which credits transfer between institutions, transfer-admissions policies, and stigma within the larger ecosystem uphold inequity, serving as latent barriers in students' transfer, baccalaureate completion, and career progression after they have completed community college. According to a 2019 report from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, only 7% of students enrolled at America's elite institutions are community-college transfers, but those students are more likely to graduate from an elite institution than both those who have been admitted directly from high school *and* those who have transferred from other 4-year institutions (Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, 2019). Yet, with so few community-college students moving on as transfer students into the most elite institutions, there clearly are unique, systemic barriers standing in their way.

Aragon and Brantmeier (2009) prioritize diversity aligned with social-justice roots within the community-college sector itself as a critical consideration in this environment: "Diversity integration and inclusive practices also foster a reconciliation process toward social justice, a process that aims to overcome the legacy of past power differentials and related privileges associated with race, gender, and class in the United States" (p. 40). Even though community colleges provide access to education, administrative decisions can inadvertently reinforce equity gaps in degree attainment if professionals in this sector do not thoroughly consider factors such as the socioeconomic status, race, ability, and life circumstances of their students.

However, community colleges also tend to be highly mission-driven, collaborative work environments in which academic and student affairs regularly work in teams across units to support rapid responses to change and to promote student success (Gulley, 2018; Hirt, 2006). Gulley (2018) applied semistructured interviews and discourse analysis to understand the

collaborations between academic and student-affairs officers from three community colleges and found high levels of collaboration around institutional goals and acute problem-solving. Findings also brought to light the consistent centering of student success found within the three community-college settings, and a seemingly lower presence of power dynamics compared to university environments (Gulley, 2018). This level of cohesion and focus on student success is certainly an asset in upholding an institutional commitment to equity in outcomes and a social-justice mission.

Understanding Subculture

To examine the movement from graduate school to the community-college environment as a transition, one must assume differences between the broader American higher education system and the subsets of the institutions found within it. The underrepresentation and separation of community colleges within the broader higher education discourse and in terms of leadership preparation is akin to what Sebald (1975) defined as a *subculture*, or a structure defined by shared values, norms, lingo, and sense of solidarity that is not fully provided for or supported by the dominant, mainstream culture in which it exists.

The concept of subculture is derived from the field of sociology and used to explain the establishment and interaction of various groups in relation to the dominant culture and norms (Dowd & Dowd, 2003). Sackmann (1992) noted that culture comprises a web of underlying actions and understandings and is built on four types of knowledge: *dictionary* knowledge (language), *directory* knowledge (the approaches used to resolve challenges), *recipe* knowledge (practices that can be applied to navigate the environment and situations), and *axiom* knowledge (a shared sense of *why* things happen). Sackmann (1992) referred to this set of knowledge categories as a “cognitive culture map, serving as the basis for drawing a group together in

shared perspective” (p. 142). I connect this model to community-college work in “Community Colleges As a Subculture of Higher Education.”

Community Colleges As a Subculture of Higher Education

When we view community-college work as a subculture of the broader higher education landscape, the experiences of student-affairs professionals who transition from graduate preparation programs into an underrepresented setting and the community-college subculture become of particular interest. Community colleges, as organizations, are unique contexts in which student-affairs work is situated. And yet, community colleges are underrepresented in the foundations on which graduate preparation programs are built, such as literature (Floyd et al., 2016; Kelly-Kleese, 2004; Townsend et al., 2005) and mainstream professional organizations; and community colleges serve populations that do not necessarily align with foundational student-development theories. Understanding both how graduates of student-affairs programs enter a context that is underrepresented in the formal training environments, and also the factors that helped the graduates adapt to this transition, may help to illuminate training and opportunities to support this transition for future emerging professionals.

Further positioning community colleges as separate and unique entities, this institutional type, compared to its 4-year counterparts, is underrepresented within higher education research, discourse, and scholarly journals (Floyd et al., 2016; Kelly-Kleese, 2004; Townsend et al., 2005). A review of 40 years of the *CCJRP* illuminates a specific language within community-college writing, with unique terms such as *student success*, *articulation*, *access*, and *workforce development* prevalent in scholarship about this sector of American higher education (Floyd et al., 2016). Invisibility of community colleges within literature, and the variance in topics across

sectors, limits dialogue about the nuances, trends, and challenges that impact this important access point within the larger system of higher education.

The position of a subculture, however, can change and evolve in relation to the dominant culture, and this potential may help to provide an alternative viewpoint to what we may perceive as underrepresentation. Dowd and Dowd (2003) explained the phenomenon: “...over time [however], the cultural power of the wider society reels groups at varying locations on the cultural periphery in towards the center—that is, to assimilate them” (p. 34). In the case of community colleges as a subset of higher education, this perspective may explain, in part, why graduate programs tend to focus on university or 4-year contexts, drawing other forms of higher education toward the dominant in an effort to simplify an understanding of higher education as a system or whole. The underrepresentation of community colleges in the broader landscape may be the result of unintentional simplification of higher education as a cohesive, tightly coupled, and easily understood social system.

In their analysis of subculture and organizational knowledge, Dowd and Dowd (2003) noted one challenge of drawing specific boundaries around cultures, thus highlighting a key question: *Where are cultural boundaries drawn?* Although community colleges are substantially different from other institutions of higher education in terms of mission (Askin, 2007; Ayers, 2017; Barringer & Jaquette, 2018; Desai, 2012; Hirt, 2006), terminology and literature representation (Crisp, Carales, & Nunez, 2016; Floyd et al., 2016; Townsend et al., 2005), and approaches to student affairs (Hirt, 2006; Tull et al. 2015), student-affairs professionals working in this subculture likely still share a cognitive culture map (e.g., terms, ways of working) with the larger, dominant cultures of general student affairs, higher education administration, or even education as a broad culture. Student affairs, in general, is a complex and multifaceted

profession, often situated at the intersection between several professional cultures and subcultures (Perez, 2016). For example, broadly speaking, student affairs is part of the national higher education culture. However, narrowly speaking, student affairs can include separate cultures organized around functional area or campus type (Hirt, 2006; Perez, 2016). Perez (2016) brought this notion of multiple subcultures into focus when she was describing the graduate-school landscape: “Master’s students’ coursework and field experiences occur at the intersection of the cultures described. Thus, it may be more appropriate to envision culture as planes that intersect at the point where an individual is situated” (Perez, 2016, p. 43). Considering the elements of a cognitive culture map as comprising a definition of culture, emerging student-affairs professionals may interact with various sets of knowledge, norms, and definitions of their work. How students move between these cultural and environmental intersections is of particular interest when we are examining the transition into the unique landscape of community-college work.

Role of Student Affairs in Today’s Community Colleges

Student affairs is formalized as a profession and united under shared organizations, theories, and standards of practice, and the institutional type is responsible for clear nuances within the practice itself (Hirt, 2006). It is important to note that a roadmap for the overall administration of community-college student-affairs practice does not necessarily exist, as Helfgot (2005) noted: “...the student affairs profession emerged in the traditional, four-year college environment and thus predates the widespread expansion of community colleges” (p. 8).

Student-affairs professionals are individuals working in a higher education setting initiating, delivering, or overseeing functions and services that support college student

development (Hirt, 2006). Helfgot (2005) defined student affairs broadly as core to the college experience, in that

Being in college is about developing an identity, a sense of purpose, and a sense of self; it is [also] about developing the soft skills employers find increasingly important: interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and the ability to work as a team. (p. 9)

Within community colleges specifically, Nevarez and Wood (2010) categorized student affairs into three broad categories: *technical*, *campus life*, and *nexus*. Under this categorization, technical student-affairs work encompasses enrollment functions such as admissions, registration, and financial services; campus-life activities are those that support students' engagement and interactions with the college and community; and nexus services are focused on those services that support or integrate with teaching, learning, and academic components of the community-college environment, such as tutoring, academic advising, and career planning (Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

As community-college missions continue to adapt to the broad needs of today's learners, those working in these areas play critical roles in deepening the student experience and supporting the systems that facilitate student enrollment and completion. Community colleges are notoriously agile, quickly developing programs to meet workforce demands and improve student outcomes. Baston (2018) described student affairs' responsiveness to change: "The most effective Student Affairs divisions perpetually design, realign, and recalibrate services to meet changing student needs throughout the entire student experience from recruitment to completion" (p. 813). This renewed emphasis on providing intentional support throughout the student lifecycle is indicative of the expanded role of community-college student-affairs functions beyond admissions and advising (Baston, 2018). Student-affairs staff, often viewed in a support role to academics and business processes, likely experience this instability more than their peers,

even within the community college itself (Helfgot, 2005). For this reason, student affairs as a profession within the community-college setting must be well prepared to respond to this rapidly changing landscape.

Community Colleges and Graduate Preparation Programs

Broadly speaking, the route to student-affairs administration does not reflect one single path, and yet specialized graduate preparation programs provide a structure to prepare for entry into this field. These types of programs can launch future professionals into academic advising, financial-aid administration, career exploration, student programming, and other services within higher education. During this time of exploration of professional culture, graduate students engage in sense-making processes to learn and understand the professional field they are pursuing during graduate study (Perez, 2016). During this meaning-making process, graduates also attempt to understand the field while simultaneously navigating institutional norms, and they lean on assumptions that are aligned with the widest or most generalizable perspective (Perez, 2016). To that end, those responsible for graduate programs must carefully examine, interrogate, and if necessary, revise the structures they have in place to socialize students into the profession itself. Otherwise, applying a wide or generalized lens may unintentionally place focus on one dominant type of higher education institution.

Curriculum and Competencies

Latz et al. (2017) pointed to gaps within student-affairs preparation programs and specifically shed light on the omission of community-college history, structure, and function within graduate-level, higher education administration curricula. Although American community colleges have also grown in quantity and representation, they are still in the early stages of development when compared to other sectors of higher education.

Student affairs is also grounded by theories of student development, which provide frameworks for designing programs and services to support student access, learning, and completion. In a study by Burkard et al. (2015), mid- and senior-level student-affairs professionals (n = 104) provided responses to a survey designed to capture what knowledge and competencies a new professional should have upon entry. Top competencies included management skills, flexibility, and interpersonal relationships, and respondents also noted student-development theories among the top areas of knowledge expected of a new professional in student affairs. When participants were asked about the theories considered critical to the new professional's knowledge base, of note were Astin's Theory of Student Involvement, Chickering's Seven Vectors, and Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (Burkhard et al., 2005). Burkhard et al. (2005) noted that only four of the 104 mid- and senior-level student-affairs professionals in the sample worked in a community college, but the researchers determined that differences between community-college and university respondents were not statistically significant.

Findings from this study illuminate two key points related to community-college student affairs. First, the theories named as critical to a new professional's knowledge base were largely derived with traditional-age college students in mind and may need adaptation for a new professional to apply them in a community-college setting. Second, this study also serves as an example of the underrepresentation of community-college student-affairs professionals in research samples. Burkhard et al. (2005) solicited study participants through ACPA and NASPA, but broadening this sample to include professionals affiliated with the AACC, League of Innovation, Achieving the Dream, or other community-college-specific networks could have diversified the perspectives of those included in the study.

Ozaki (2016) also identified and summarized the canon of theories widely accepted as influential in college administration and identified their lack of applicability to community-college settings. In this think piece, Ozaki (2016) noted that the cornerstone theories of student development are broad enough to apply to the diverse groups served by community colleges, but the theories may need to be adapted for use in these settings. Models such as Astin's (1985) input-experience-output (IEO) model and Tinto's (1987) Model of Institutional Departure place heavy emphasis on experiences as critical to student growth, an area in which community-college student-affairs professionals grapple with how to foster students' responsibilities outside of their student identities (Ozaki, 2016). Tull et al. (2015) have presented a similar overview of theories that drive student-affairs practice, also noting that, although the theories can be applied to community-college students, they were originally developed to inform practice in traditional, 4-year, residential college settings.

Both Ozaki (2016) and Tull et al. (2015) gave nod to the emergence of theories focused on learning and identity development among adults, students of color, and others historically underserved by higher education. However, the mere presence of these theories does not necessarily ensure their full integration into student-affairs preparation programs. Viewed through a critical lens, continued reliance on theories that do not account for environment or other identity factors creates tensions in the capability of graduate programs to adequately expose students to the challenges and opportunities within community-college work.

As student-affairs and higher education leadership programs continue to evolve along with the profession, many have become more structured and formalized in their approach to preparation and learning outcomes. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has set forth guidelines pertaining to faculty roles and ratios, practicum contact

hours, and program structure within master's student-affairs programs; ACPA and NASPA also developed professional competencies in 2010 (Lidell et al., 2014). Broadly speaking, the competencies set forth by the ACPA and NASPA serve as primary cornerstones of student-affairs professional preparation and should be accepted as relevant in the community-college context, as well (Tull et al., 2015). Important to note, however, is that a gap exists in literature that focuses on the perceptions of those who transition between program-curriculum and community-college work. Studies examining the alignment between graduate preparation and entry into professional work have regularly failed to disaggregate across the type of institution to which graduates transition. Using a Likert-scale survey, Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Molina (2009) studied perceptions of competencies among recent graduates (n = 139) and supervisors (n = 86); the researchers noted high competency alignment in participants' respective understanding of student development and the application of these principles to practice.

Young and Dean (2015) administered a survey to rate recent graduates' (n = 109) perceived mastery of stated CAS learning outcomes for student-affairs preparation programs. Derived from learning outcomes in a collection of master's-level programs, Young and Dean (2015) identified five categories of preparation: (a) student development theory, (b) administration of student affairs, (c) individual/group interventions, (d) organizational administration, and (e) assessment, evaluation, and research. Incorporating these categories into a Likert-scale survey, Young and Dean (2015) assessed 109 recent graduates' perceived mastery of each area and found that participants reported the lowest level of mastery in the areas of research (assessment, evaluation, and research) and group/individual interventions (also referred to as management). Although Young and Dean (2015) highlighted areas in which recent graduates may experience a knowledge or competency gap, the study relied on self-reporting and

did not disaggregate respondents based on the type of institution in which they were working. Little is known from this study about potential differences in experience between those working in 4-year settings and those working in community-college contexts. In addition, a similar gap in sample representation in studies involving mid- and senior-level student-affairs professionals, such as the aforementioned Burkhard et al. (2005) study, limit our understanding of what competencies and knowledge are even considered a priority by community-college supervisors.

Despite this self-reported gap, research and evaluation competencies are seemingly incorporated within the majority of master's programs in student affairs. Using skills-deficiency areas identified in previous studies, Cooper et al. (2016) facilitated a content analysis of the mission, curricula, practicum, and learning outcomes from 136 student-affairs master's programs to determine the extent to which the perceived deficiency areas were represented. Young and Dean's (2016) findings indicated a perceived, self-reported skills gap in the area of research and evaluation; however, Cooper et al. (2016) found this topic represented in 70% of the programs' stated outcomes. To contrast, evidence of management and supervision, another area noted as low competency in Young and Dean's (2016) study, was contained in only 9% of the content in [Cooper et al.'s] programs. These examples of disconnect between content and perceived mastery is of particular interest for community-college settings because skills in leadership, research assessment, and evaluation are critical to community-college student-affairs professionals' ability to operationalize the data and assessment frameworks set forth by Achieving the Dream, Columbia University's Community College Resource Center (CCRC) and other organizations that mobilize institutional reform within the sector.

Specifically designed to guide community-college work, AACC sets forth competencies for faculty, mid-level leaders, and administrators, highlighting actions and skills that support

institutions' advancement across the facets of organizational culture, policy, student success, leadership, infrastructure, information literacy, fundraising, communication, and collaboration (AACC, 2018). Interestingly, ACPA and NASPA do not necessarily address the nuances of community-college contexts, and AACC does not set forth specific competencies for those working in student affairs. Although these competencies overlap in many ways, potential differences leave community-college student-affairs professionals to independently cultivate a professional identity and approach to their work. Tull et al. (2015) acknowledged this challenge and recommended that community-college student-affairs professionals achieve competency across both sets of standards. Such competencies can serve as a unifying factor to connect community-college professionals to a larger profession and provide a common knowledge base, direction, and definition of practice for those working within a relatively new sector of higher education (Munch & Cortez, 2014).

Both CAS standards and the professional competencies continue to shape the overall approach to graduate preparation for critical roles in student affairs, yet these drivers are not without critique. Eaton (2016) challenged the myopic applicability of competencies, urging faculty to consider the dominant lenses through which the competencies were developed, and to identify what may be left out when the competencies unilaterally drive curriculum, preparation, and practice. He noted skills mastery as fluid and challenged by moments that create dissonance, stating that "Experiences throughout one's professional or personal life may challenge the linear structuring as presently articulated, causing individuals to revisit, revise, or eliminate position and learning that was previously achieved within a certain competency" (Eaton, 2016, p. 577). To accept that experiences and change may alter the competencies that standardize the profession is to accept that disruptive experience, such as broader exposure to a different sector

of higher education, may change the widely accepted beliefs that undergird the student-affairs profession.

Further challenging the narrow application of competencies in driving program development are the views of those who hire new professionals for work in the field. Faculty responsible for incorporating competencies into graduate-program curriculum seemingly disagree with mid- and senior-level student-affairs professionals in terms of both importance and the methods by which skill mastery is achieved (Kuk et al., 2007). Through analysis of 109 survey responses (44 senior student-affairs officers, 34 mid-level managers, and 31 graduate-program faculty), factor analysis identified four general categories of competencies: (a) individual administrative skills, (b) professional knowledge, (c) goal setting and facilitating change, and (d) management. It is important to note that the community-college sector was both incorporated into and noted specifically in this study (respondents included senior student-affairs officers representing seven community colleges, and mid-level managers from six community colleges). Statistically significant differences between faculty and administrators were found across three of the four categories, with faculty ranking all categories except professional knowledge of lower importance than administrators ranked them. These findings suggest that graduate students' future supervisors place high value on practical skills such as management, goal setting, and administrative skills, whereas program faculty may prioritize professional knowledge and expect that graduates will learn the practical skills while in their first years on the job (Kuk et al., 2007). Disagreement between faculty and supervisors calls into question graduate-program structure, suggesting that a balance between competencies and practical experiences may better prepare future student-affairs professionals for the reality of work. This variation in perspective may be even wider for those entering community colleges as new

professionals, given the specific organizational, mission, and cultural nuances outlined earlier in this paper.

Experiential Learning and Mentoring

Unique subcultures of the institution types in which student-affairs professionals work may be responsible for differences in how individuals from similar graduate-school programs may experience elements of overall work life, such as professional relationships, connection to work, daily schedules, and institutional priorities (Hirt, 2006). Although scholars have examined, and interrogate, the role of professional standards and competency-based approaches to graduate preparation, few studies have noted how such drivers influence, prepare, and support students' aspirations to enter community-college student affairs.

A better understanding of these additional aspects is particularly important when it comes to expanding graduate students' experiences with diverse institutional settings, which may be limited. To examine the gap in this data, Taub and McEwen (2006) surveyed 300 students in 24 graduate student-affairs programs to examine factors that influence individuals' decisions to enter the field and found that personal contact with a peer, mentor, or professional in the field was a primary factor in students' decision to pursue a career in student affairs. These findings further reinforce the importance of exposure to shape experiences and career choices at the point in which individuals make an initial decision to pursue student affairs as a profession, or during formal graduate preparation. Notably, however, 72.7% of survey respondents identified "working at a college campus" as another influential factor in this decision, and also the likelihood of their doing "meaningful work" (72%). Foundations in social justice, access, and with a focus on education align community-college student-affairs work with these factors. However, it is unclear what students' images of "college campus" may have informed this

response, or whether or not the connection between student affairs and doing meaningful work is explicit in the minds of those who are examining student affairs as a career option. Taub and McEwen's (2006) study illuminated some of the factors that may drive students toward student affairs, but more current, additional research may be needed to understand how respondents' personal experiences shape their decisions to enter the field, or to understand how these influential factors are connected to graduate students' decisions to pursue experiences that might expose them to community-college work.

Similarly, Liddell et al. (2014) designed and applied the *Survey of Early Career Socialization in Student Affairs* to understand how graduate-school experiences contributed to the identity development of those new to the field. Liddell et al. (2014) found that 80% (n = 144) of the recent graduates surveyed worked in a type of institution that mirrored that of their undergraduate experience, and that 77% (n = 137) of those surveyed continued in the same functional area with which their graduate assistantship had been aligned. Liddell et al. (2014) also concluded that graduates are seemingly "attracted to the comfort of home" (p. 83), and that "housing and residence life is a major pipeline into the profession" (p. 82). This study was limited, however, in that the institutional types in which participants worked was aggregated only by public/private designation and not further broken down by 2-year or 4-year setting. Little is known about the undergraduate preparation of students enrolled in student-affairs graduate programs nationally; however, conclusions from the Liddell et al. study reinforce the power of exposure, and the important role that both personal experiences and experiential training such as assistantships may have on future work.

Community-college student-affairs professionals, especially at a senior level, are in an ideal position to engage with graduate students and increase their exposure to community-college

work. In a review of 300 community-college chief student-affairs officers (CSAOs), 82% had established mentoring relationships, but only 27% of the CSAOs considered the relationships to be formalized in nature. And many of these relationships were built within the field itself, not necessarily as a result of connecting with those in the professional pipeline (Rodkins, 2011, as cited in Knight, 2014). However, connecting graduate students to community-college professionals may require intentionality because the majority of student-affairs preparation programs are housed at universities with graduate schools (Underwood & Austin, 2016). This physical distance and lack of connection means that graduate programs and community-college professionals must make a concerted effort to connect and build pathways for mentoring and experiential learning. In a similar vein, opportunities for community-college faculty and staff to become engaged in research and graduate-level teaching may be limited because of differences in value and incentive structures between 2-year and 4-year institutional cultures (Kelly-Kleese, 2004).

In a phenomenological study designed to increase understanding of the experiences of new professionals entering community-college student affairs, Hornak et al. (2016) facilitated interviews and focus groups at seven Midwestern community colleges. This study provides an important glimpse into perceived imbalance in preparation, and participants noted that understanding who community-college students were was critical to their success upon entry, and that networking, innovation, and keeping up on national community-college trends and research were noteworthy socialization areas (Hornak et al., 2016). Participants also described trainings related to working with diverse student populations and involvement in professional organizations as important to their successful transition (Hornak et al., 2016). Field-related content that introduces master's-level students to community-college organizational structure,

historical roots, and mission is one way to facilitate this exposure and build a professional pipeline into the work. Graduate students who are connected to community-college experiences are seemingly impacted by the connection. In an examination of student learning and reflections among a small, localized sample of 12 graduate students who completed a course in community-college topics at a Midwestern public university, the students' narrative responses reflected a broadened understanding of how community colleges fit into the larger landscape of American higher education (Royer et al., 2016). Interestingly, at the onset of the course, the 12 participants had either negative ($n = 9$) or neutral ($n = 3$) impressions of community colleges. In addition, only three respondents had taken a class at a community college as undergraduates, and three had a relative who worked at or attended a community college. Prior exposure through their own experience or that of a relative did not appear to have an impact on their initial impressions of community colleges at the beginning of the course (Royer et al., 2016).

Students who were introduced to community colleges through this specialized course discussed how the experience had also piqued their curiosity about community-college work, challenged their own biases about the types of students community colleges serve, and opened their eyes to professional opportunities in this sector of higher education (Royer et al., 2016). One participant also noted how the course had improved her ability to support inbound transfer students to the university in which she was completing her assistantship, which reinforces the idea that learning about community colleges may prepare not only those who enter the sector as professionals, but also those with futures working in traditional higher education environments as well (Royer et al., 2016). Given the increased focus on transfer and connectivity within higher education as a system, an increased understanding of community-college environments, and student populations serves student-affairs professionals well regardless of the type of institution

they enter postgraduation. The Royer et al. (2016) study is also encouraging in that introduction to community-college work may help to ignite interest in the sector itself, even if individuals have not experienced the setting themselves as a students, professionals, or community members.

Graduate School to Profession: A Transition

As individuals envision themselves facilitating student-affairs work, graduate-level preparation programs that introduce them to professional organizations and provide them with opportunities for work-based learning are an important component of their professional identity development, training, and mentoring (Pittman & Foubert, 2016). However, when we critically examine the basic tenets of graduate student-affairs preparation programs through a community-college lens, gaps begin to appear. Specifically, graduate student-affairs preparation programs hosted at 4-year universities likely lack both a physical and experiential connection to community-college environments. Helfgot (2005) described this factor that challenges preparation programs focused on community colleges: c (p. 8). In addition, literature and research focused on higher education is decreasing in practitioner-based authorship. Instead, it is primarily being developed by university-based faculty with little daily exposure to other subsets of higher education (Floyd et al., 2016), and it is lacking in community-college representation (Townsend et al., 2009). These factors certainly challenge individuals' potential exposure to and understanding of community colleges as unique organizational environments for student-affairs work.

Little is known about the experiences of graduates who enter the community-college sector as professionals (Latz et al., 2017), and even less is known about how students in graduate preparation programs identify opportunities within community-college settings, determine the programs' congruency with personal or career goals, and begin to transition into the context

itself. We can view this bridge between the graduate preparation experience and entry into the profession as a time of change, tension, and transition. According to Schlossberg (1981), a “transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). When we view this shift through the lens of a transition framework, we can examine and understand the underlying factors that are supporting movement into an underrepresented sector of higher education.

Preparation for professional work in student affairs has derived from student-development theories and organizational analysis largely associated with a traditional view of higher education that is situated in a 4-year college or university context and designed to serve traditional-age students (Latz et al., 2017; Hirt, 2006). Given the underrepresentation of community colleges in foundational aspects of graduate student-affairs preparation programs, the experiences of individuals who transition between these structured educational programs and into the setting itself are of particular interest.

Understanding School-to-Work Experiences

By their very nature, higher education and professional work represent two environments that incorporate personal change, transition, learning, and growth in adulthood. We can view how individuals experience, interact with, move between, and navigate these environments through a number of frameworks and lenses cultivated through research across academic disciplines such as sociology, career development, managerial sciences, adult education, counseling, and organizational or industrial psychology.

In the initial development stage of this inquiry, I identified several frameworks from different academic disciplines to analyze how students move between graduate preparation

programs and community-college environments. Possible frameworks included those grounded in concepts of organizational attraction, socialization, and transitions. As I reviewed frameworks from these areas, however, misalignments began to emerge. Critical analysis of these frameworks helped to narrow the focus on the *transition* between two distinct environments, as opposed to applying a lens singularly derived from individual or organizational perspectives. In the following section, I illustrate the rationale for applying a transitions framework to understand how individuals experience movement between their graduate preparation program and professional student-affairs work in the community-college sector.

It is important to note that my research approach is grounded in constructivism, which centers on context as a significant component of the human experience and critical to understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences (Anderson et al., 2012). Although individual meaning-making of the transition between graduate preparation and community-college student-affairs work was a focus in my study, a review of frameworks through which to analyze and understand the individual's experience focused on concepts beyond person-level theories. Constructivism assumes that individuals "social constructions are often developed within institutional contexts" (Anderson et al., 2012, page #?). In a case study involving two graduate-student participants, students described the importance of external environments in determining values misalignment and disconnects between their vision of the field and what they observed in practice (Perez, 2017). In addition, a survey of 178 new student-affairs professionals revealed that out-of-class applied learning was a significant contributor to students' perceived gains in knowledge, skills, and involvement within the profession (Lidell et al., 2014). Both studies underscored the importance of external systems in facilitating an exploration of a complex, macro-level system with subcultures, such as that of higher education.

The Transition Framework

Transitions are fluid, occurring in stages rather than sequential steps; as such, they provide context for an individual's growth and development while also challenging the individual to make meaning of a change (Anderson et al., 2012). We can broadly apply transition theory to a number of experiences in an individual's lifetime and represent moments in time in which the individual must draw upon internal and external factors to make sense of tensions or inconsistencies. Anderson et al. (2012) described the broad application of transition theory as "[while the] transitions differ and the individuals differ, the structure for understanding individuals in transition is stable" (p. 38). More specifically, Schlossberg's earlier (1981) 4S model is all-encompassing, providing four frames within which to understand the factors and resources that support transitions. Unlike organizational or socialization frameworks, the transition framework provides a structure from which to view personal, environmental, systems-based, and social components of an individual's experience.

Anderson et al. (2012) described transitions as "occurring in phases and involving leaving behind the old and moving on to the new through an emergent growth process" (p. 49). This focus on growth processes is well suited to understanding the multiple transitions and decision-making points an emerging student-affairs professional may experience while moving between educational and professional contexts.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory: A Framework Within Which to Explore This Transition

Schlossberg (1981) conceptualized a theory of transition originating from the field of counseling education that we can broadly apply to understanding how individuals, specifically adults, move into and through periods of change in environments, assumptions, and beliefs. Developed to understand how adults cope with changes, Schlossberg's (1981) theory of

transition also accounts for the fact that individuals may adapt to changes and transitions differently based on a number of factors, both internal (psychosocial, identity, values, and prior experiences) and contextual (source, timing, duration, and available support systems).

More specifically, Schlossberg (1981) set forth three distinct sets of factors that contribute to and explain why individuals adapt to transitions differently. First, the characteristics of the transition itself can be viewed as one set of factors, including timing, perceived losses/gains, source, and impact on the individual. A second set of factors includes those associated with the time period before and after the transition, and a third set includes personal characteristics of the individual at the center of the change (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg later expanded and refined these three sets of factors to establish the 4S system, which serves as a practical framework for our understanding and adapting to transitions (Schlossberg, 2008). For the purpose of this study and understanding transitions associated with movement from graduate preparation to community-college student-affairs work, I have applied this latter, four-part adaptation of Schlossberg's transition theory.

In his 4S system for understanding how individuals move through transitions, Schlossberg's categorized elements of change into four groups: those pertaining to *situation*, *self*, *supports*, and *strategies* (Schlossberg, 2008). The unique combination of variables associated with each category helps to account for differences in personal, individualized experiences. The *situation* category provides a lens through which one can identify contextual elements of the transition, such as location, family dynamics, and other factors that are situational to the person's life. The *self* category is characterized as the personal, internal facets of an individual, such as confidence, positivity, and values. The third category, *supports*, refers to the systems and

networks in place to help facilitate a transition, and the *strategies* category reflects the actions an individual takes to enact, cope with, or facilitate a transition (Schlossberg, 2008).

To fully understand how student-affairs professionals transition from graduate programs into the community-college setting, we can use this framework to illuminate the individual transition-adaptation factors associated with Schlossberg's (2008) 4S system. Representing experiences in which internal and external factors intersect, this multifaceted approach is relevant to graduate preparation for a career in student affairs, and also to entry into community colleges as a sector of higher education. For example, curriculum and practicum experiences embedded within graduate-preparation program structure have been found to facilitate powerful socialization experiences for emerging student-affairs professionals (Liddell et al., 2014), or to increase awareness of community colleges as a unique sector of American higher education in the case of a community-college-specific course (Royer et al., 2016).

However, some internal factors may also contribute to how professionals transition into their careers. Internal characteristics such as values congruence and commitment were significant factors in the socialization process among new professionals entering the field of student affairs (Hirschy et al., 2015). For example, a qualitative analysis of entry- and mid-level community-college student-affairs professionals found that systems and structures such as mentoring programs, conferences, meetings, and curricula were helpful in bridging the gap between both graduate preparation and entry into community-college settings and individualized, personal experiences with community-college education (Hornak et al., 2016). These studies and others supported the use of a framework that examines both system-based and intrinsic characteristics that guide the student-to-professional transition experience.

Although the applicability of a framework provides a lens through which to examine and understand the lived experiences of the participants, it is important to note that each of these four factors can be highly personalized. Despite the structure of the transition model, it is important to note that the individual's worldview may influence how a graduate student may even view transition or change, or acknowledge its impact at all. For example, emerging student-affairs professionals who directly experienced community college through their own education may experience the transition into this work as deeply as students who originally assumed they would join the dominant university culture of higher education. Schlossberg (2011) noted that "people differ in how they cope with what seems to be the same transition and often cope well in one transition but feel ineffective in the next" (p. 160). One benefit of Schlossberg's (2008) theory is that the four Ss provide an approach to identifying and understanding the unique sociocultural kaleidoscope that informs each individual's meaning-making as they navigate transitions. In the following sections, I delve deeper into each of the four factors present in the model itself; I also offer examples that may be found in individuals' graduate-school or professional entry experiences in student affairs.

Situation

In the transitions model, *situation* refers to the specific details associated with the transition itself and can include things such as what triggered the event, whether or not the change shifted the individual's role, the individual's perception as short- or long-term, and whether the individual views the transition as a positive or negative shift (Anderson et al., 2012). Certain events or experiences, and details associated with them, can launch a person into an analysis of their personal assumptions or cause them to apply a different perspective to their lives and future. In graduate programs' dual training model for student-affairs preparation (Perez,

2017), both practicum and curriculum experiences may bring about situational factors to support students' transition into community-college work.

Examples of situational factors might include enrollment in a graduate course that covers community colleges, or a practicum in a subculture environment that challenges an emerging professional's understanding of norms in student-affairs practice. Situational factors that are nonacademic and out of the individual's control may also be supported, such as a student's transition into community-college work although the student has a limited geographic region in which to seek an entry-level role in the field, or there are limited opportunities in the student's functional area of choice. These situational factors ignite a transition and set the tone for how an individual identifies and navigates the pending transition.

Self

The *self* domain of the 4S model is built on the assumption that all individuals bring personal characteristics, identities, past experiences, and values with them as they experience transitions in their lives. These traits can weave together to create unique, highly individualized approaches to these key decision-making points and transitions. As noted previously, these unique factors, shaped by individualized nuances and interaction with social environments, are what differentiate how individuals view and approach change (Anderson et al., 2012). This interpretation from Schlossberg's (2008) model, which describes *self* as "the person's inner strength for coping with the situation" (p. 160), has been expanded. Anderson et al. (2012) gave nod to the socioeconomic, gender, cultural, and psychological resources, values, and other personal factors that may contribute to the manner in which one might approach or navigate a transition experience.

Narrowly speaking and focused on emerging student-affairs professionals, we can use the *self* domain to identify and understand the individualized factors that may trigger students' exploration or entry into community-college student-affairs work, the manner in which they interpret education or mentoring experiences that challenge their notion of what higher education systems "look like," or the personal connections that may inform the students' choice to work in a part of higher education that is underrepresented in literature, professional organizations, curriculum, and discourse. Consider, for example, students whose socioeconomic status is highly salient in their identity, who attended a community college themselves, or who experienced a university environment as marginalizing or unwelcoming because of their race, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation. These self-based factors may draw students to work in the community-college context and provide internal support for them to make the transition from their graduate program and into the community-college subculture.

In addition, principles of person-organization fit and social-justice identity represent other aspects of the *self* as it relates to the transition into community-college student-affairs work. One study followed a sample of 1,000 graduating college seniors through their graduation and entry into the workforce and found that values congruence had a significant impact on person-organization fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001). The salience of one's social-justice-ally identity may also serve as a self-based factor in how individuals navigate transitions and view themselves in relationship to a larger system (Edwards, 2006). For instance, emerging professionals with well-developed social-justice attitudes may experience an introduction or transition into community-college subculture differently than another individual in whom these values may be less salient.

Support

The supports to which an individual has access during any transition are critical in that they provide the formal and informal social networks and systems from which one can draw energy and advice to navigate the experience at hand (Schlossberg, 1981). Family, faculty members, support groups, peers, coworkers, and supervisors can help support individuals as they grapple with and navigate changes in assumptions, roles, and experiences. Support people and systems do so by providing feedback, offering navigational assistance and signals, and fostering psychological and emotional security. Supports can be perceived as positive in most cases, but it is important to note that these systems can also serve as distracting factors in one's ability to navigate a transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

Notably, a recent qualitative study of student-affairs professionals who entered community colleges after their graduate preparation program highlighted the support structures that assisted in their socialization into the field (Hornak et al., 2016). Participants were student-affairs professionals at seven unique Midwestern community colleges during the 2012–2013 academic year who shared their professional entry experiences during individual interviews and focus groups. Participants described the following as helpful in their transition to work: formal trainings, research of national trends, professional development focused on understanding who the community college serves, trainings focused on improving service for diverse student populations, peer networking, and institutional policies (Hornak et al., 2016). Although results of this study cannot be generalized to all individuals transitioning into community-college work, they do place emphasis on the formal and informal sources of support during a transition into the field.

Structured courses and experiences that promote exposure to community-college work are another example of a support that aids in the transition from the dominant higher education

discourse and assumptions, and shifts the focus toward exploration of the 2-year sector. Royer, Mulvihill, and Latz (2016) facilitated semistructured interviews with master's-level students who enrolled in a community-college course as part of their graduate program. Participants shared how the structured course challenged their biases about community colleges. In one instance, a participant indicated that the formal course had shifted her career goals toward the community-college sector, which thus represents a transition of assumption and thought about her future goals (Royer et al., 2016).

Mentors, supervisors, and peers can also serve as critical supports to emerging community-college student-affairs professionals by sharing experiences, fostering connection to the literature and professional organizations prevalent within the subculture itself, and addressing any tensions the individuals may feel between their previous notions of student-affairs work and the opportunities afforded within the 2-year context. In fact, in a study of the significant influences on the professional identity development of 542 student-affairs professionals, the role of a mentor or supervisor was found to be the most significant factor in supporting the students' professional development (Pittman & Foubert, 2016). The *support* domain within Schlossberg's (2008) 4S model represents the system and relationship factors from which emerging student-affairs professionals draw support in transitioning between graduate-preparation program experiences and the world of student-affairs work, specifically in a community-college setting.

Strategy

In the transition model, strategies encompass the specific tactics, actions, and coping mechanisms an individual applies to make meaning of, and steer through, tensions and transitions. As noted previously in "The Transition Framework" section, transitions begin with a shift in assumptions, roles, or experience, and the response to these shifts can be understood as

strategy. In the context of the graduate preparation experience and a shift toward community-college student-affairs work, the dissonance students may feel between the two contexts represents the start of the shift:

When there is continuity between coursework and field work, new practitioners do not engage in sensemaking and use their developmental capacity for self-authorship to make meaning of their experiences. In contrast, when there are discrepancies within or between experiences in classes and in practice, the need for sensemaking is triggered. (Perez, 2017, p. 767)

Although it is unclear to what sense-making actions or approaches Perez (2017) was referring, we can understand strategies as actions to manage, control, or respond to a change (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, as cited in Anderson et al., 2012). Applied to an emerging student-affairs professional, actions may include engaging in additional research to resolve the differences between the dominant culture and the subculture; consulting with peers, supervisors or faculty members; exploring a community-college professional organization; or acquiring additional information to make sense of the shift. One strategy may even be disengagement, or leaving the context when the transition or shift represents too great a disconnect.

When applying Schlossberg's (2008) 4S model to gain an understanding of the factors that support individuals through transitions and shifts, we must also accept that the domains represented by the 4S model are not stagnant. Rather, the four elements can be adjusted, strengthened, and altered to better scaffold those individuals in a transition (Anderson et al., 2012). This option is especially relevant to the supervisors and faculty members who are supporting emerging community-college student-affairs professionals in positions; faculty and supervisors are well positioned to design and develop the specific experiences that support the movement from student to professional.

Literature Review and Invisibility: A Perspective

Throughout the development of this study, I used literature from a number of disciplines, including sociology, higher education, student affairs, and organizational development, to identify and frame the research problem. Although I was conducting a review of previous research and writing related to the study's frameworks, my own experience began to dovetail with the literature itself. Specifically, one of the factors in the invisibility of community colleges within higher-education discourse was the lack of research pertaining to the community-college sector (Floyd et al., 2016), and this was a noticeable gap as I compiled this study. Although research and earlier literature are integrated throughout this study, many of the studies I used to frame the research problem needed conditional explanation because of the limitations of their sample or the manner in which the data had been disaggregated without reference to community colleges or even institutional type in general. Relevant studies on the following key topics either did not note institutional type or failed to include community colleges as one of the disaggregated data points in the study: professional competency validation among either student-affairs program alumni, their supervisors, or both (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Kuk et al., 2007; Young & Dean, 2015); impact of practicum experience on professional preparation (Young, 2019); entry experiences in the field of student affairs (Hirschy et al., 2015; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008); and professional identity development (Liddell et al., 2014; Pittman & Foubert, 2016). Findings from studies that did include community-college consideration, such as Burkhard et al. (2005), represented the sector, but community-college participants made up only 3% of the total sample of 104 ($n = 4$). Only Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) noted the need to broaden their study across institutional type to gain a better understanding of how to help emerging professionals prepare to work in different types of institutional cultures.

Although some of the literature included in this review does center on or acknowledge community colleges as an institutional type for examination and consideration (either as a primary context for inquiry, or as a consideration disaggregation), I personally experienced the oversight and invisibility of community colleges as a consideration within important topics related to student-affairs preparation and experience.

Literature Review Recap

Today's community-college student-affairs professionals balance the demands of multiple stakeholders and missions, rapidly changing efforts to improve outcomes, and the evolution of institutions that are still in relative infancy compared to universities. Community-college student-affairs practitioners are agile, creative, mission-driven, critical thinkers who must align resources and services to meet the needs of exceptionally diverse campus communities (Hirt, 2006). Within American higher education, community colleges uphold an important mission and are key stakeholders in creating equitable access and fostering social mobility through education. For community colleges, preparing new professionals for student-affairs work is both critical and mission driven, as Knight (2014) explained:

Promoting excellence in the community college means we are committed to delivering education that will improve our students' educational development and their lives, and as a result will improve our communities. Preparing and supporting community college student affairs professionals to meet those expectations requires a commitment to the excellence perspective. (p. 6)

Perpetuating a traditional approach to preparing student-affairs professionals without intentionally integrating both dominant and underrepresented discourse continues to reinforce the systems and structures that elevate some types of higher education while ignoring others. In contrast, understanding community-college underrepresentation in higher education, the negative impact of that underrepresentation on professional preparation, and the transition experiences of

new professionals provides a rationale for advancing the presence of community colleges in graduate preparation programs.

Because the current study focused on the transition between the graduate program environment and community college, centering on the resulting professional experience places focus on unique elements within both individual contexts and the bridge between them. Each of these environments represents the students' exposure to varying norms, both dominant and conflicting, in which individuals may make meaning while weighing against personal, external, and situational factors:

Given that professional socialization during student affairs graduate training occurs across multiple cultures, new practitioners may experience tensions between various cultural norms and expectations. As such, they may be more aware or responsive to one dimension of culture than others at any given point during their graduate study. (Perez, 2016, p. 43)

The presence of these diverse cultural norms, expectations, and related tensions provide the basis for delving further into the experiences of individuals as they transition from professional preparation and into an institutional setting that can be described as a specific subculture of higher education (i.e., community colleges) in contrast to the field's dominant, university-based perspectives.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Human nature, and also human interactions with social structures and environments, are complex and multifaceted. As individuals move through graduate preparation programs for entry into student affairs, they begin the process of socialization and establish familiarity with the organizational, administrative, and cultural nuances of higher education as a system. Students gain this knowledge and experience of higher education through their interaction with a graduate preparation structure that is built upon both curricular and experiential learning models (Perez, 2016). The literature reviewed in the previous chapter reflects gaps between foundational elements of student affairs as a profession (such as higher education research, terminology, theories, and other characteristics of graduate programs) and the organizational and experiential nuances of the community-college sector. As individuals shift from graduate preparation programs to community-college student-affairs work, they are likely to face tensions between these contexts, and how they make meaning of and navigate the transition is of particular interest.

As noted in Chapter 2, we can examine factors associated with Schlossberg's (2008) 4S categories (situation, self, support, and strategy) as critical supports in this transition, or shift, between environments and into a context that is underrepresented in higher education discourse. The application of this framework aids in our overall understanding of how student-affairs professionals experience and make meaning of this transition between two culturally different environments.

Research Approach and Rationale

This study is grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which assumes that individuals make meaning of the world by interacting with other individuals, organizations, social constructs, and phenomena (Crotty, 1998; Glesne, 2011). Viewed through a constructivist lens, lived experiences and interactions with social constructs build multiple realities as individuals make meaning of their interactions with the world, others, and systems (Crotty, 1998). This theoretical framework supports the study's purpose, which is to enable increased understanding about how recent graduates of master's-level student-affairs or higher education leadership-preparation programs adapt to the transition from a graduate-program experience largely constructed from a 4-year university paradigm into a community-college subculture.

Aligned with a constructivist paradigm, this study does not just focus narrowly on the sequence or details of the transition itself; rather, the research approach for this inquiry was designed to draw out the lived experiences and interpretations of participants who moved through the specified transition. Schlossberg (2011) explained the nuances of transitions: "It's not the transition per se that is critical, but how much it alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 159). As Schlossberg (2011) indicated, the specific factors that buoy individuals during transitions are of particular interest for this study. The concepts of *situation*, *self*, *supports*, and *strategy* provide the foundation from which I as the researcher developed questions for data collection.

To fully understand the complexities of this transition, I sought in this study to illuminate tensions within graduate preparation, which are largely grounded in theories, research, and networks situated in perspectives that align with the 4-year institutional context, and the work context of community-college student affairs. Although not the primary paradigm through which

I addressed the research problem, elements of critical inquiry also informed this research design. I specifically incorporated this perspective to support interrogation and examination of the mainstream norms that undergird a social system, such as American higher education (Popkewitz, 1990). A critical lens informed the study's design through the inclusion of what Bhattacharya (2017) described as contrast questions, applied to explore misalignment, contradictions, and tension between two environments across which the participants had traversed. I also incorporated this focus on tension and misalignment into the data analysis through a specific stage of *versus coding*, which I describe later in this chapter.

Participants

To provide a basis for understanding the transition from graduate student-affairs programs and into the community-college subculture, participants with specific and distinct experiences in both environments were central to this study and thus informed the sampling method. Given the broad frames reflected in Schlossberg's 4S system, it is unlikely that one single participant's lived experiences can accurately capture the intersecting factors and complexity of this school-to-work transition. For the purpose of participant selection in this study, I broadly defined *student-affairs professionals* to encompass roles that reflect the three subcategories of work experiences, as identified by Nevarez and Wood (2010), within a technical, 2-year regional, or community-college setting.

Student-affairs professionals may enter the field from a variety of diverse educational experiences; so graduate preparation programs specifically designed to support entry into higher education leadership or student affairs provided a parameter for the purpose of this study. Therefore, graduates of master's-level programs that focused on content related to student-development theory, higher education organizational structure, student service delivery, and

higher education research and context (Herdlein, 2004) were the intended sample for inquiry. Potential participants had to be graduates from programs formally listed within the program directories of two prominent national student-affairs professional organizations, NASPA and ACPA.

In addition to being graduates from a NASPA or ACPA student-affairs program, the potential participants needed to be “new professionals,” as defined by those entering their community-college, student-affairs role within the first zero to 3 years after the conclusion of their graduate degree. This parameter was set, in part, to aid in the participants’ recollection and recall of specific experiences and meaning-making processes during their transition. Socialization theory also positions individuals’ first few years of an entry into a new organization or environment as the timeframe of adjustment, learning, and values examination (Cooman et al., 2009). This initial timeframe of entry is ideal for additional inquiry into the factors that support transitions. In summary, the parameters for participants in this study were completion of a graduate a program designed to prepare them for work in student affairs or higher education leadership, and entry into a professional role at a community college within zero to 3 years after completion of graduate school.

Recruitment

In addition to purposive sampling, as the researcher I used a convenience approach (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Because of my positionality, I recruited participants from professional networks and communities in which I am currently engaged, including via contacts within the Achieving the Dream network, Frontier Set Aspen Community College Cohort, Columbia University’s CCRC, state and regional community-college organizations and advocacy groups, alumni of higher education leadership and student-affairs graduate programs, and closed

social-media groups for student-affairs and community-college professionals. Additional efforts to identify individuals for participation in the study included utilization of personal contacts in student-affairs leadership positions at peer 2-year institutions, professional networks, listservs, and social-media communities serving community-college and student-affairs professionals. The sampling reach for this study was national in scope and not defined by a specific geographic region.

In formats that support attachments and expanded content, recruitment communications included a detailed introductory letter (Appendix A) designed to include information about the study; a description outlining researcher and participants' engagement during data collection and analysis, including explicit focus on their experience of community-college culture as student-affairs professionals; my positionality as the researcher; informed consent; and my contact information so potential participants could request additional information about the study. For communication platforms in which a detailed introductory letter could not be included or space was limited, I provided contact information and a brief overview of the study. Finally, I encouraged interested individuals to reach out via email to obtain additional information and an introductory letter.

After I received an initial response from prospective participants, I forwarded them an introductory survey form (Appendix B), to collect preliminary information about their undergraduate and graduate educational experiences, graduation date, current institution of employment, and functional role within student affairs. I used this self-disclosed data to verify whether the participants' experiences fell within the parameters of the study and also to provide a foundation from which background information guided casual conversation and a way to start the interview process. I collected completed informed-consent forms prior to the interview and

also covered their content verbally in each interview before commencing the recording of the interview.

In total, 10 individuals responded with interest in participating in the study; however, two respondents did not meet the study parameters based on their introductory survey results and follow-up clarification. One respondent received study materials but did not complete them and was not responsive to multiple attempts to schedule an interview. Two additional individuals agreed to participate but were not included in the study because saturation was achieved within the first five participants' narratives.

A total of five individuals participated in the study. The participants' educational and professional experiences are dispersed across broad geographic representation, including Southeast, Midwest, Appalachian, and Southwest regions within the United States. Two participants earned their master's degrees from the same institution; therefore, the five participants' stories reflect experiences associated with four graduate preparation programs.

Data Collection

Given the personal, story-telling nature of narrative inquiry, I incorporated efforts to maintain high levels of privacy and confidentiality within the study's structure. As Creswell (2012) reminded qualitative researchers, "participants give a great deal when they choose to participate in qualitative research projects, often revealing intimate details and experiences of their lives" (p. 232). Specific to this study, I have omitted participants' personally identifiable information such as name, graduate program attended, current institution of employment, professional affiliations, geographic location, and other characteristics from which their identity might be derived.

To establish a comfortable setting for discussion, Saldaña and Omasta (2018) have encouraged qualitative researchers to consider how factors such as physical space, peripheral noise or distractions, and privacy considerations may hinder or support the collection of rich and personal data. Data collection for this study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which public health restrictions limited travel and reduced capacity for in-person interviews. However, I used video interviews as an alternative, and these still align with Saldaña and Omasta's (2018) principles. Interviews were facilitated via Zoom's video-conferencing platform, but from a location to minimize background noise, and in self-selected locations in which the participants felt privacy levels would be appropriate. To that end, if interviews occurred within the participants' daily workspace or campus environment, they were held after work hours. Zoom was the primary platform for the interviews; however, data collection occurred by a separate, personally owned recording device to prevent data sharing with a third-party platform. I recorded interviews to foster a natural, conversational dynamic and to aid in software-based transcription and data analysis.

As the researcher, I made all efforts to secure, password-protect, and independently initiate, complete, and maintain data, notes, and other documents I collected. To protect the confidentiality of participants' individualized stories, names, and identifiers of participants have been represented throughout the study using pseudonyms they personally selected during the informed-consent process. I included this specific step to ensure that names, locations, and other information were not at risk of identification during the transcription process, during which sound files were uploaded and transcribed by a web-based, speech-to-text transcription service (Rev), which has a documented privacy and security policy. During the informed-consent

process prior to the commencement of recording, I encouraged participants to avoid stating the name of their program or institution, and to utilize pseudonyms throughout the interview itself. I also matched participants' introductory survey information with the correct data set through use of their chosen pseudonyms, with originals kept accessible only to me as the researcher, and in a file a separate from the study's working documents. Individual names and identifiers are not used in publication. I uploaded interview recordings, field notes, transcribed and coded files, and release forms collected through the research process and kept them in a password-protected, cloud-based storage system accessible only to me as the researcher.

Key principles of qualitative data collection, such as prompts that encourage rich descriptions, structural questions designed to elicit a participant's meaning-making descriptions of both environments, and contrast questions to inquire about perceived differences between graduate-school training and community-college student-affairs work (Bhattacharya, 2017), were reflected in the interview structure itself. This distinction is important in identifying tensions between higher education's dominant culture that manifests within a graduation program and the culture of community-college work, in contrast to simply a general transition from work to school.

I intentionally integrated the study's primary framework in the design of the interview approach, which included open-ended questions to explore environmental factors (*situation*), individual attitudes and beliefs (*self*), networks and systems used to resolve perceived challenges (*support*), and the actions participants took to address tensions (*strategy*) and that supported adaptation during this specific graduate school-to-work transition. In addition, I orally presented to each participant prior to the interview a definition of the term *culture*: "networks of knowledge consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with people"

(Hong, 2009, p. 4). I provided this definition as a foundation for a dialogue centered on cultural elements of the contexts of interest.

Interview Process

I conducted an initial, semistructured, 60-minute to 90-minute interview using a standard interview protocol (Appendix C) that guided the narrative dialogue between the participant and me, but I allowed flexibility for follow-up questions and adjustments based on verbal, physical, and informational cues (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). To assess both time allotment and the effectiveness of the interview protocol in collecting narrative data and guiding inquiry, I used the first participant's interview as a pilot. This initial participant conversation concluded within a few minutes of the 90-minute allotment, and in practice the designed protocol effectively guided data collection. Given that I made no adjustments after this initial interview, I have included in the study data collected from the pilot.

At the conclusion of each interview, I provided participants with information regarding the method that I would use to analyze what they had shared, and also contact information and instructions for sharing additional details, personal stories, or thoughts after the conclusion of the interview (Appendix D). I asked participants about their openness to follow-up engagement and clarifying communications in the event that additional questions emerged during the data-analysis stage. Finally, at the conclusion of their interviews, I also encouraged participants to share the study with others in their networks who may fit the sampling parameters.

Data Analysis

To more broadly understand how certain factors support this transition from graduate preparation into the community-college subculture, I collected narrative data from five participants, providing triangulation through inclusion of a minimum of three distinct sets of data

(Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Once the data was transcribed, I reviewed the narratives and stories collected from the interviews to identify themes, perceived misalignment between contexts, adaptive behaviors, and stories that highlighted personal experiences and meaning making throughout the transition between participants' graduate preparation and student-affairs involvement within a community-college setting.

The analysis process involved three formal stages, or rounds, of coding and thematic identification. During a preliminary read, I first applied inductive analysis to remove filler language, edit the transcription for recorded accuracy, and identify broad stanzas and quotes. This inductive step was specifically designed for identifying analytical units or chunks of data based on broad, emergent themes after a preliminary read (Bhattacharya, 2017), and it helped me prepare the data for deeper analysis over three distinct stages of review. It is important to restate that, although each participant's data was unique in the individual elements of the stories, saturation was achieved at the conclusion of the fifth participant interview, when specific themes for further analysis began to emerge during this analysis step. As a result of this preliminary stage, I cut cleaned and chunked data from the transcript and recorded it on the left-hand column of a summary sheet. I provided adjacent space in the right-hand column to code according to the specific approach of each stage.

During the first read and aligned with the constructivist paradigm, I reviewed the data using a dramaturgical coding method to draw out elements of all individuals' stories, personal meaning-making processes, interpretations, conflicts, attitudes, and emotions present throughout their lived experiences (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This stage of analysis was designed to enable me to conceptualize participants' experiences by identifying their chronological, thematic, or relational elements within their respective stories. Both this phase and the second subsequent

coding read served to inform the study's first research question, from which I sought to understand how individuals experience a transition from a graduate program that is both within and based on elements of dominant higher education culture, to a community college. These two points represent two separate, but related, contexts across which a transition occurs.

Driven by the study's secondary construct of subculture, I then applied versus coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 222) to the next stage of analysis. This second read identified points of tension and alignment between participants' graduate-program and community-college contexts, as they had experienced during their individual transitions. The purpose of this second coding stage was also to validate the constructs of transition and subculture I used to examine the school-to-work experience.

In a final and third read of the data, I directly applied Schlossberg's (2008) transition model, the study's primary framework, as a thematic lens through which to identify the specific adaptive situations, characteristics of self, supports, and strategies that served as supportive factors during the participants' transition between the two defined contexts. This third analysis stage was designed specifically with the study's second and third research questions in mind, which seek to identify both the external factors (situations and support frames) and the internal factors (self and strategies frames) that facilitated the participants' transitions.

Throughout the coding and analysis stage, I contacted participants via the communication channel of their choice for additional, clarifying information. This practice occurred with two participants. Although all participants had agreed to secondary, follow-up interviews if the protocol was not addressed in full within the first session, or to delve deeper into the topic, secondary interviews were not needed for any of the five participants. Upon conclusion of this analysis, participants received a summary and were given an opportunity to provide optional

feedback on the interpretation, framework application in coding, and thematic patterns identified during the review. This opportunity for member checking is intentionally woven into the design of the data-analysis stage to build trustworthiness and establish accuracy in interpretation. The participants and I discussed divergent interpretations between me as the researcher and them during a subsequent follow-up correspondence that I initiated. In cases in which we could not resolve or clarify differences, I omitted the data in question from the study to maintain trustworthiness.

At the conclusion of all three review stages, I synthesized coding from the summary sheets to describe emergent and divergent themes connected to the study's foundational constructs of *subculture* and adaptive factors that supported the participants' *transition* into a community-college, student-affairs environment. Qualitative researchers can be thought of as artists, translators/interpreters, and transformers who illuminate key aspects of individuals' experiences, stories, and interpretations through writing (Glesne, 2011, pp. 219–220). This creative approach to representing relationships derived from narrative data gives voice to participants and highlights their personal experiences as new professionals working in a subculture of American higher education. Glesne (2011) described the process of reading about the lives of others this way: “By reflecting on others’ lives in light of their own experiences, readers acquire new insights and perspectives on some aspect of human interaction, and perhaps, are moved to action” (p. 220). To that end, the final presentation of findings from this study incorporate elements of storytelling and thematic interpretation, grounded in the study's established frameworks, to identify points of alignment, tension, connection, and opportunity along the pathway between graduate preparation and community-college student affairs as a profession.

Using Katy's narrative data as a sample, the following tables provide an example of the coding processes and data organization approach I applied during the analysis stages of this study. The tables reflect a truncated analysis and should not be interpreted as Katy's full data set or analysis. Rather, these tables provide a visible example of how I reviewed the data using the study's primary frameworks, subculture, and transitions as lenses. In Table 1a, Katy's initial exposure to community-college work and experiences is noted as concurrent to her graduate studies, and several of the key elements of her story are also noted. This table provides an example of the type of initial information identified within each narrative, which helped me as the researcher begin to formulate the key points and timelines of participants' unique stories.

Table 1a. Initial Summary (Dramaturgical Analysis)

Participant	Exposure(s)	Key Points in Story
Katy	Concurrent with graduate school (grad program high on intentional CC integration; required internship at a CC, which was an urban one and within an enrollment center)	Book/ practicum/ formal focus on institutional differences in graduate school was highly impactful in guiding her to college-access work and understanding environmental differences between types of institutions "Broadness" is a key theme in her story to ensure she could adapt to any form of higher education; consistent consciousness of establishing and maintaining a broad skill set Observes high levels of collaboration and interconnectedness, centered on student success and based in necessity, not preference. High workforce connection and localization, MOUs/territory, etc. (local considerations)

Note. CC = community college; MOU = memorandum of understanding

Table 1b captures the next stage of analysis, which highlighted the participants' individual interpretation of, and experiences with, community college as a subculture of higher education.

Table 1b. Subculture and Misalignments

Participant	Subculture (Yes/ No)	Noted Misalignments/ Differences
Katy	<p>SOMEWHAT: Other schools have to find ways to work with subsets of students; but CCs are “very subsetty.” “But there IS a unique level of collaboration because the student body is overwhelmingly ‘niche’ and that is pretty unique to community colleges, making it a subculture and a subset.”</p> <p>Subtle references to subculture:</p> <p>“that blew my mind, that was the most surprising thing” (re. importance of workforce connection in CC culture).</p> <p>“Inside culture” of “promoting from within” since CC individuals know the culture and organizations trust they can work within it.</p>	<p>When searching for graduate school, understood there would be differences in how she would be prepared, and intentionally selected a program with broad enough content and certificates to secure employment in many settings (early on, knew there were differences across the field).</p> <p>Noticed a difference in CC work once she began to learn about it in graduate school, but could not quite place why. Later realized she resonates personally with the student population and demographics.</p> <p>When learning about institutional type, came to understand CC work would allow her a broader set of knowledge/experience from which to grow compared to a functional-area-centered career selection common in SA.</p> <p>Interconnectedness of units across a CC is bonded by one factor: Student Success. “So many more people are doing interconnected work” just to support one student’s needs, compared to other environments.</p> <p>Misalignment about critical nature of workforce connection/career/training preparation found in CCs (but not covered at all in her graduate program)—this was a surprise to her in the culture itself.</p> <p>Disconnects along the topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion and its prevalence in grad school dialogue vs. community college.</p> <p>Trying to engage with students requires a strategy that is different from that used in a residential context.</p>

Note. CC = community college; SA = student affairs

Finally, in Table 1c, an abbreviated version of analysis of Katy’s narrative shows the relationship between the experiences and meaning-making processes she shared, using the four specific lenses provided by Schlossberg’s (2008) 4S system, one of this study’s frameworks.

Table 1c. Examining Factors Present in Transition

Participant: Katy	
	SELF and STRATEGY
Primary Emergent	She is a highly strategic, planful, and intentional person when it comes to decision-making; largely informed by periods in her life in which resources were not consistent/stable)
Situation	Classroom experiences in graduate school drew attention to differences in institutional type and subsets of higher education
	Came to understand she preferred CC work, but her personal/family situation was the priority factor in securing her first professional role (in housing)
	Pursued CC certificate in her master's program, which provided direct exposure to what she was learning about institutional differences
Support	Relationship with supervisor (similar backgrounds); guides on culture
	"Easy to find camaraderie because you work SO close with everyone"
	Students—Evidence of impact on students, how thankful they are, etc., helps her reconcile the challenges of a demanding job
Self	"I have been a little bit of everywhere" (diverse experiences from which to draw/ adapt)
	Saw herself in CC student population when she began to learn about it; led her to pursue the CC certificate
	Natural adaptation: Shake things up, push back, questions
	Loves bringing new ideas to an environment; noticed there is a lot of room for that in community colleges
	Resilient; personal connection to low income, adult learners
	Donated her kidney to a stranger (giving)
Strategy	Gain broad experience as opposed to selecting a single functional area
	Heard about cultural differences between institutions during grad school courses, but was not sure how she might experience them; relied on graduate courses and experiences to resolve differences
	Making mistakes and learning to navigate them
	Finding the right people to talk to
	CC as way to support college access as a career focus overall

Note. CC = community college

At the conclusion of each analysis, I combined all participant-analysis summaries into several aggregate sets of notes, with pseudonyms removed, to identify how the themes

overlapped and which of Schlossberg's (2008) 4S factors were salient across experiences, and to draw out the emergent themes within the study as a whole. These subsequent comparison steps informed the study's findings, as I present them in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

Narrative inquiry involves the collection of participant stories, and the constructivist paradigm I used to design this survey assumes multiplicity in interpretation of events and experiences (Creswell, 2012). Efforts to establish trustworthiness in interpretation are guided by the four questions Hollway and Jefferson (2000) posed, as stated in Glesne (2011): "...what do you notice, why do you notice what you notice, how can you interpret what you notice, and how can you know your interpretation is the right one?" (p. 211). Even though participants received explanatory materials prior to the interview, these materials provided only basic information about my positionality as both researcher and community-college, student-affairs professional. However, given my close personal proximity to the subject matter and parallels with the participants' experiences, a natural connection emerged through our shared understanding of terminology and functional work within student affairs as a field.

I monitored this connection, of course, through heightened awareness of my social and professional identities throughout the data collection and analysis process; I mitigated the risk of personal bias by journaling throughout the stages of coding in the form of memos and comments within the transcription margins, and moments in which I shared agreement or a personal anecdote within the interview transcript. Although I intentionally kept these moments of personal interaction to a minimum, I incorporated specific effort to note and reflect on these types of interactions as part of a broader focus on critically examining my subjectivity. Throughout data collection and analysis, I kept a researcher journal to answer to these critical questions and

identify moments of personal connection to the participant stories. I periodically revisited these notes during the analysis stage both to identify and to balance personal positionality and objective analysis of the participant narratives. In addition to guiding my critical thinking as I engaged with the data, the personal notations also helped me to differentiate between hunches and data collected directly from the participants themselves (Bhattacharya, 2017). I intentionally incorporated this step into the study's design to identify, critically examine, and mitigate personal bias or subjectivity in interpretation.

I also incorporated into the analysis step a collaborative approach between myself as the researcher and participants to ensure that the data collected was accurately represented and participant voice was reflected throughout the study's written presentation. To incorporate member checking as an intentional step to address trustworthiness, I provided participants with information about the process and frameworks used to analyze their stories. In addition, participants received an analysis report and their narrative summary (Appendix E) via email, and I gave them the opportunity to share insight into the analysis and interpretation prior to finalization. Participants recommended no changes, and two participants shared the following reflections of the final analysis and narrative: "This is beautifully written and perfectly encapsulates my experiences and feelings," and "This was simply awesome. I felt like you really captured what I was trying to say." This direct positive feedback from two participants served to validate the interpretation and reporting of their individual transitions and lived experiences.

Validity

Two specific, underlying assumptions provide the foundation on which I constructed this study: transitions and subculture. To establish construct validity, I designed introductory interview questions based on the protocol to explore the participants' own characterization of the

movement from graduate school to community college as a *transition*, and also to collect narrative data from the participants about observed or experienced differences between community colleges and the dominant culture of higher education. The interview protocol I used to collect narrative data was designed to guide exploration of both internal and external factors present in the individuals' personal transition experience, intentionally covering the entire transition experience from graduate school to professional work. I applied this design to establish content validity, to ensure that the entire content area for examination (in this case, a transition) was covered by the structure of the dialogue (Terrell, 2016).

Methodology Overview

I designed this narrative inquiry, grounded primarily in the constructivist paradigm, to leverage semistructured interviews as the primary instrument to elicit participants' self-disclosed and interpreted life experiences within the two major contexts of this study: graduate preparation for student affairs and community-college subculture. I carefully considered layered, intentional steps as outlined in this chapter to draw out emergent themes and explore the study's topic through the constructs of subculture and transition. This approach to analysis and synthesis of the data collected is reflective of the complex nature of human experiences as individuals construct and make meaning of life events and transitions (Crotty, 1998).

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Stories reveal the complex and individualized experiences that illuminate points of significance, misalignment, and meaning making synonymous with the constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Jones et al., 2014). As Jones et al. (2014) have reminded us, interviewing is “more than just asking questions” (p. 132). Guided by a semistructured interview approach, conversations with the five participants included in this study were rich with lively storytelling and personal interpretations of culture and transition; they elicited humor, passion, and points of connection between the participants and me as the researcher. I designed these interview questions to delve into the study’s three guiding research questions: (a) How do individuals experience graduate-school preparation programs and community-college student-affairs work as two separate, but related, cultures?, (b) What external factors facilitate new student-affairs professionals’ transition from graduate school into community-college work?, and (c) What internal or personal factors support this transition between graduate school and community-college work?

Given my close personal proximity to the subject matter and parallels with the participants’ shared experiences, a natural connection emerged through our shared understanding of terminology and functional work within student affairs as a field. I monitored this connection, of course, through heightened awareness of my social and professional identities throughout the data collection and analysis process; I mitigated the risk of personal bias by personal journaling throughout the stages of coding in the form of memos and comments within the transcription margins, and moments in which I shared agreement or a personal anecdote within the interview transcript. I intentionally kept these moments of personal interaction to a minimum. As the

researcher, I took specific efforts to note and reflect on these types of interactions, which I incorporated as part of a broader focus on critically examining my subjectivity. The stories within this chapter are grounded in participants' voices, yet points of personal connection are integrated throughout to emphasize critical awareness of my perspective as the researcher. The stories highlight human experience and conversational exchange as central to narrative inquiry.

In this chapter, these five stories are illustrated through narrative summary, along with emergent themes derived from what individual participants shared and the subsequent analysis processes described in Chapter 3. I discuss these emergent themes at the end of this chapter in relationship to the study's guiding research questions.

Participant Demographics

Five participants shared their stories and experience during this study. The participants were linked by their shared experience in graduate preparation for work in student affairs and entry into a community-college environment within 3 years of their graduate degree completion. Beyond these shared experiences, however, the stories and lived experiences are richly diverse and individualized in terms of geographic location, graduate program structure, life circumstances, and student-affairs functional areas.

Each of the five participants describe a different timeline associated with the intersection of their graduate preparation and transition to community-college student-affairs work. Only Ematha first began working at a community college after completing her master's degree; each of the other participants first entered community-college work while they were enrolled in their graduate preparation program. All five entered permanent, professional roles at a community college within 3 years of their graduate studies. Katy and Emily first entered professional roles at universities, but transitioned to community-college roles within the parameters of the study's

requirements. The reasons they did not immediately enter community-college work and then changed positions are incorporated as individual factors in their narrative summaries.

All five participants were working or had worked in professional roles that cross all three categories of student-affairs work, as defined by Nevarez and Wood (2010): *technical*, *campus life*, and *nexus*. None of the five participants attended graduate school at the same institution from which they had received their undergraduate degree. None of the participants work or had worked at the same community college, though Emily and Katy were alumna of the same graduate program. Prior to entering community-college work as a professional or attending graduate school, only one participant had personally attended a community college, having done so as a high-school dual-enrollment student. All five participants began and completed their undergraduate degrees at institutions considered 4-year universities or colleges, and their graduate programs are all listed in the NASPA or ACPA program directories. Table 2 provides a snapshot of the participants' demographics for comparison.

The uniqueness of each participants' story is important in understanding the transition from graduate school to community-college student affairs through unique combinations of support provided from both internal and external factors. Each story illustrates the participants' perceptions of cultural congruence and misalignment, to help shape our understanding of graduate preparation and community-college student affairs as two separate, but related, cultures.

Table 2. Participant Demographics and Profiles

Participant	Entry Point (from graduation)	Nature of Entry	Functional Area	Experience of Cultures
Ematha	11 months	First professional role	Career Services (campus life)	Postgraduate
Hillary	1 month	Moved to full-time role after completing master[s]	Student Services (comprehensive)	Concurrent (part-time job)
Katy	1.5 years	Second professional role (university residence life for 1 year)	Student Services (comprehensive)	Concurrent (experiential)
Emily	6 months	Second professional role (university role for 6 months)	Orientation/ Onboarding (technical)	Concurrent (experiential)

Stories of Transition

Each of the five participants shared rich details of their lives and professional experiences, sharing humor and moments of confusion, and also their personal triumphs and joys as new professionals, and more specifically, within community colleges. The stories presented in this section demonstrate their lived experiences and meaning-making processes; the stories also give life and personality to participants' individual transitions between graduate school and community-college student-affairs work after they completed their master's degrees.

Ematha: Called to Serve Students and Community

Ematha immediately responded to the opportunity to talk about her work in community-college student affairs. An energetic member of the career-services team at a community college, with an impressive track record of student support and success, she was eager to connect with

someone who wanted to hear more about her work, journey, and insights related to this unique area of higher education she had come to love.

Following a route to the field that differs, in part, from the other participants in this study, Ematha held a master's degree in communications, but with an emphasis and certificate in higher education leadership. After completing her undergraduate degree in communications, she pursued graduate studies in interpersonal communications as a way to prepare for a career aligned with mental health, social services, or counseling. Her graduate program was offered at an institution with a student-affairs and higher education leadership program recognized by ACPA and NASPA, and she began to integrate a higher education focus into her communications master's degree by leveraging the program's certificate option. Her initial graduate-school path centered on an interpersonal-communications focus, but she was introduced to the intersection of communications and the higher education certificate through a faculty member who had recently begun working with communication students interested in education, course design, and other multidisciplinary applications of their academic field of study. Ematha quickly fell in love with the idea of combining these areas as a way to diversify her experience; she began augmenting her communications degree with classes in higher education, education, instructional design, and organizational development. She described her higher education courses as creating awareness ("yes, this is my jam," she said of that exposure to such diverse coursework), which led her to pursue the additional certificate in higher education leadership. She described her higher education classes, especially those in course design, as "by far the most fun and most interesting because we had people from all different departments . . . and residence life and housing grad students were by far the most fun people!" Driven by a desire to feel prepared for any career field after graduation, Ematha also taught undergraduate communications

courses during her graduate program and drew upon this experience to contrast what she eventually experienced in a community-college environment.

Although she recalled learning about higher education as a system, and the politics and organizational dynamics within it, she admitted she did not fully understand student-affairs functions until she entered a student-affairs role herself. She described her experience entering community-college student affairs as “seeing it in a more concrete way,” as opposed to her time in graduate school, where the functions seemed disconnected, spread out, and areas did not feel united as a profession or an organizational unit known as “student affairs.” The cross-functional work and lack of departmental boundaries she experienced almost immediately when she entered a professional role at a community college helped to shape in her a deeper understanding of the structure and function of student affairs as a contributing force on campus.

Like other participants in this study, Ematha’s journey to community-college student affairs had a few twists and turns along the way. Following completion of graduate school, she applied for a role for which she had thought she might be underqualified: an administrative-associate position in the career center at a nearby university. When she did not get the position, she questioned in what role, specifically, her educational preparation would be of value. This application experience and perceived misalignment between her credentials and what she had identified as an entry-level role in higher education, left her confidence shattered, especially after the university had shared with her that her earned master’s degree did not cancel out her lack of work experience. She took a job, briefly, outside of higher education to make ends meet, and 3 months later was presented with an opportunity to apply to the community college where she is employed today.

The new position was at the director level in Career Services, for which Ematha initially felt grossly underqualified after her rejection. Both her spouse and a colleague in the field had pushed her to apply; and after what she described as “a very long and difficult interview process,” she was “surprised” to have received an offer for a position with far more responsibility than the one from which she had been rejected. Ematha’s entrance into community-college student affairs then began to shape her professional identity to the point that she now considers herself to be a passionate advocate of the sector, and an active contributor to her community college’s social-justice and antipoverty mission. She feels deeply connected to community-college work, describing it as “a whole different world . . . and it is a beautiful world.”

Of course, her transition into a community-college student-affairs role was not always a smooth one. Ematha exclaimed, “No one trained me for this!” when sharing her first reaction to small budgets and the organizational politics of her community-college environment. She recalled her first reaction to strained resources: “I didn’t have near[ly] the income [departmental budget] I thought I would, and it was really difficult to think ‘I can’t order T-shirts. We can’t do an ice cream social.’” She described how small her community-college department budget was, even in contrast with the budget she had had for programming and teaching in her graduate assistantship:

I did a little bit of budgeting in my internship, but that was with a million-dollar budget at a university, not a hundred thousand dollars at a community college. That’s a huge difference in funding and the stuff you could do at a university versus a community college. That was a really big thing [for me]. It was hard for me to attract those resources.

Ematha noticed, however, that financial strains were not unique to her community college; they also served as a topic that united individuals with similar roles at conferences and

professional-development events. She fondly recalled this dynamic at a statewide, college career-services meeting just prior to higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

You can pick the community colleges out in those things. It is so funny. The community-college people will start asking questions immediately. Everyone [the university teams] was like 'We use SpeakEasy or Virtual Career Fair, CareerEco [platforms designed for the purpose of hosting virtual career fairs].' I am there like . . . 'Shoot, we cannot afford to do a whole system just for that!,' and shared with another community college that we just use Zoom. I was like, 'I already developed stuff to do this on Zoom; do you want it?,' and she said she'd love that. So I sent it all her way, and we set up a call; and I feel like community colleges are just there for each other. You band together like 'Yeah, we're all here for the same mission and that is to help our students.'"

In reflecting on what she wished she had known in graduate school about working at a community college, Ematha shared, "I wish I knew how people just crave connection and want to be seen. There is a balance between teaching and caring that I wish 'grad-school me' would have known because I felt like the field was a little more harsh." She described struggling to find that balance herself when she first came to community-college student-affairs work, when she realized students needed more than what she was prepared to deliver. Describing herself as a teacher, she first approached working with students on resumés and job preparation in a narrow, educational way. She had since resolved what she perceived as misalignment between her approach and the community-college culture, and had adapted her student-service approach to still teaching, but also with a true willingness to sit with the students and help them for as long as it takes to address all of their needs.

This approach, she described, was grounded in care and was a visible and prominent "cultural" element in her work environment, reflected in mission, physical banners, slogans, and performance expectations. At times, Ematha described what she perceived to be a standard student-affairs practice, such as offering only a few career fairs a year as "not okay—*especially* at a community college." Ematha deeply believed her work in a community-college career center

helps lift the community out of poverty through certificates, degrees, and connection to high-demand jobs in a region that has suffered economically over the past few decades. She recognized and articulated that her institution directly impacts and changes life, moving families out of poverty because an individual gets an education and a degree. Her awareness of student needs was clear and well understood, and she described her college's commitment to innovation as a method of meeting the needs of a student population she described as largely low-income, parenting children, working multiple jobs, and juggling plenty of other life challenges while working on their degrees. "They need as much as we can give them," said Ematha, "and lots and lots of love."

Ematha described her role, apparent in other participants' stories also, as "wearing many hats," even as the director of a functional area. While the workload was heavy and demanding in terms of what she was expected to give to her students, community, and college, she identified the relaxed environment, open channels of communication, shared vision, and blurring of hierarchical lines as positive factors in navigating such multifaceted work. She described being able to text or call a vice president or the president and actually receive a response, which was in contrast to what she had both learned and experienced about university organizational dynamics and politics.

Through our conversation, it was evident to me that Ematha was a talented and contributing member of the student-affairs profession, and highly capable of advancement. However, in speaking about the political and organizational dynamics she was experiencing, it was clear her focus was entirely on student outcomes, success, and support. Ematha illustrated a demanding work environment, though one that was grounded in support and focused on outcomes rather than titles or advancement. "If you have a student heart," Ematha advised others

in student-affairs work, “this [community college] is your home. If you are here for your own personal growth or to climb a ladder, this is not your place.”

She took a moment to reflect on her own career trajectory, as though she had not considered it previously. Finally, she responded,

I know I am not climbing the ladder. Literally, there are only two positions “above” me, which are our VP and our president. I am not going anywhere. And that is not my goal. I don’t want to climb. That is not the purpose. Shoot, if I took a job anywhere else, it would probably be lower than what I am right now. If I went to a university, I would not get a director position, even though I have done it for a year now. Career progression is not on your brain [referring to those working in community colleges]; it is so focused on “What can I do to better serve the students, all the time?” . . . And on my end, it is also “What can I do to better serve our community and our employers?”

As Ematha shared her story, a sense of regret was woven in and out of our conversation as she recalled her early experiences teaching communications courses while in graduate school. She periodically reflected on one particular student that served as a constant reminder of how community-college work had fundamentally changed her as a professional and educator. Wistfully, she recalled offering the student an opportunity to write a persuasive argument to petition for his 79.4% to round to 80%, which was the difference between a C and a B for the course. The C grade was due, in part, to several absences, which she never pried into to understand the reasons he had missed classes. The student never responded to her offer, and she said she often thinks about that student, the C on his lifelong transcript, and what his story might have been. When asked what she might have done now that she did not do then, she paused for a moment, and then shared simply, “Probably just a little more care, a little bit more outreach, rather than just one email that could have just gotten buried in an inbox.”

Ematha’s life-changing journey into community-college student affairs was not calculated or mapped; rather, her spouse and a colleague helped push her to apply for a position

for which she felt she was underqualified. She had not planned or intended to enter community-college work, but she found a home in an institution that provided the supports and clear guidance to help her shape a personal identity as a contributing member of her community college's culture of care and love for their community. Throughout her story, Ematha identified specific points of misalignment between graduate-school training and working in a community college: organizational dynamics that were unlike what she had been expecting, the overt emphasis on student care in her place of employment, and the need to adapt what she had previously known to meet each individual student's needs. However, Ematha relied on her natural desire to help people, and on supportive colleagues, to assimilate to a culture where she saw herself making a difference. Ematha's transition story is one of coming to understand community-college work as what she called "a labor of love, versus the business and administrative side of higher education." As she described her job as life changing during our interview, she reflected with a pleased smile, "It was truly one of those moments I shot for the moon and ended up among the stars."

Ematha experienced the two cultures as "cocultures," describing community colleges as a culture that is not subordinate to dominant, higher education culture, but rather, is aligned and equal, but different. She experienced differences between her graduate preparation and community-college culture in terms of the community college's resource management and levels, a highly student-centered approach to services and adaptability, and a shifted paradigm regarding who college students are. In addition, she experienced cultural differences in how she had been prepared to navigate organizational dynamics, in contrast to the flat, more casual nature of the community college in which she ultimately ended up working as a professional. For Ematha, her internal desire to help others and to approach the world with "the heart of a teacher"

were primary throughout her story and served to support her transition into a culture she perceived as a “labor of love.” Her relationships—with peers, her spouse, colleagues, and students—provided external resources from whom she drew knowledge and the ability to navigate her personal transition to community-college student-affairs work.

Hillary: A Slow Build Toward Community-College Passion

“I became a resident assistant. I feel like this is how everybody’s story starts.” Hillary’s introduction to student affairs as a profession is not unlike stories collected both in this study and in academic inquiry into the field of student affairs. As a sophomore in college, she had changed her major several times, bouncing from foreign languages to journalism, war-and-peace studies, and landing on French with an emphasis on language education. However, as she progressed in her undergraduate experience and continued to serve as a Resident Assistant (RA), her supervisor began to open her eyes to the possibility of working in higher education. A student herself in the institution’s College Student Personnel program, Hillary’s supervisor helped her understand how pursuing student affairs as a career could help feed her curiosity and insatiable interest in what Hillary described as “everything.”

Hillary attributed her frequent changes in her major to seeing herself in many different career options, and she described student affairs as a field in which “that [exploration and diversity] is encouraged. It’s encouraged to work outside of your domain, and you do not need to focus on just one place.” She was drawn to the overall field by the possibility of building a resumé that could showcase so many different skills and abilities, and she eventually dropped her education minor to graduate earlier and apply to the College Student Personnel graduate program at her institution.

Despite her connections and mentoring relationships at the institution, Hillary was waitlisted for entry into the graduate program. She described this experience as “I felt really burned. My undergraduate institution taught me everything I knew about student affairs.” Although she eventually was accepted, the decision came too late because Hillary had already accepted an internship outside of the field of student affairs and in another state; so she began applying to graduate programs in her new geographic location.

While she was awaiting acceptance into a graduate program, Hillary decided to pursue roles that would build her resumé for future student-affairs work’ but she looked broadly for work in any functional area or institution type. By happenstance, she accepted a part-time position advising students with disabilities at a local community college and began her first semester in a student-affairs graduate preparation program nearby. Ten months into her new role, Hillary discovered she was pregnant, finished one semester of graduate studies, and then she and her partner moved back home and closer to her family.

Determined to restart her dream to pursue student-affairs work, Hillary began searching for part-time jobs in student affairs exactly one year after the birth of her son. Her dreams to pursue student-affairs work became a reality again. Now with a one-year-old son and engaged to her partner, she began another job search and accepted a part-time role as an academic advisor in a federal, grant-funded, comprehensive unit designed to support low-income and first-generation college students (TRIO). Although she had not necessarily intended to seek employment at another community college, moving back to her hometown area had limited her options to one university, a regional campus, and the local community college. She also resumed her graduate studies, this time through an online College Student Personnel master’s program that allowed her to work part time and also focus on her son.

Working part time at the community college while attending her graduate program gave Hillary a unique perspective. One particular area in which she experienced a disconnect between the two contexts pertained to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Hillary experienced her student-affairs graduate program as “liberal,” and with a high emphasis on diversity principles in student-affairs practice. This perspective resonated with Hillary, who described herself as an “ally” and as a student-affairs professional who was comfortable discussing race, gender, and sexuality. She shared the experience of learning about inclusive practice in her graduate program, but receiving pushback from students and colleagues when she began introducing preferred pronouns into meetings, in her web presence, and in forms in her office. Hillary was able to push through this discomfort and incorporate diversity into her part-time student-affairs role, but she described noticeable differences between the culture of the community college in which she worked and what she was learning in the graduate preparation program.

Hillary had not envisioned herself working at a community college, and she had entered both part-time opportunities due largely to happenstance; but her view of the institution type began to evolve over time and while she was in the graduate program. She entered the work with a self-described bias, thinking community colleges were mostly accessed by students who did not have the financial means or desire to attend a university. Once she learned and experienced more about how community colleges fit into the larger higher education system, her perspective shifted from viewing community-college students as “fragile” to viewing them as “resilient”:

I think I started to respect that [the community colleges] a lot. Also, I think it was also the populations I worked with because I worked with students with disabilities before. I was like “They need this.” This is like that stepping stone to teach along the way, and then, working in TRIO, we work with other underrepresented student populations. I just have come to see how important community colleges are to people who do not have the access and privilege I did. I had a chip on my shoulder, like “I worked hard to get here.” Just looking back, how silly I probably sounded.

Nearing completion of her graduate program, Hillary considered leaving community-college work because of burnout and the belief that a different student population might bring back the passion she had felt at the beginning of her graduate program. Looking back, she reflected, “I am not sure why I felt a different population would reverse my burnout; the community college has the most diverse population of students.” She also considered alternative options in her region, and found the community college in which she had been working to be the best option in terms of opportunities. Just weeks after completing her master’s degree, Hillary’s opportunity opened up: Her supervisor announced she would be leaving the college, leaving a vacant director role in the TRIO office. As a new graduate with little management experience, Hillary questioned whether or not she would be a desirable candidate, but said she “put the pedal to the metal” to achieve the program’s recruitment numbers without an acting director. This effort earned her the full-time role and promotion without a search, and she was placed officially in the director role several months later.

Several participants in this study perceived community-college culture to be closed off to new grads as the result of internal promotions and a prevalence of part-time employees seeking full-time positions. Hillary perceived her own institution in a similar manner, sharing with me that she was both proud to have been promoted and also understood firsthand why others might experience frustration in accessing community-college positions. In reflecting on her director role, she shared that she felt she was very lucky, given the limited opportunities she felt were present at her institution and others. She did, however, describe her community college as a place in which work and output was valued over credentials and even longevity. This was a source of both pride and frustration for her as a student-affairs professional:

I got frustrated at times because so few people with degrees in higher ed [at my work] and I see the value of administrators having a degree in higher ed. We do not

have a single person in our highest level of leadership that has a doctorate in higher education leadership or anything like that . . . they're [the college] clearly just moving people up. But, then it's like, "Are they doing their job? Are they doing their job well?" Then that becomes the argument. But I think that is the hardest thing for me coming from grad school . . . I worked really hard to get this degree.

Hillary, of course, realized she had benefitted from a culture in which she perceived work ethic and output as paramount to credentials. She described her fellow peers who held master's-degrees as a small but connected group in the institution who often teased each other through inside jokes, such as "putting on their student-development-theory hat," or she critiqued what she described as "political games" they sometimes observed those who wished to climb the proverbial institutional ladder playing. Overall, however, Hillary said she found solace and support when she was among her colleagues with student-affairs training, noting that it was nice to work with others who, for example, understood why she wanted to meet with each of her students three times a semester or created intentionally designed engagement opportunities to boost student development.

Throughout our conversation, Hillary shared how much she appreciated the more casual, less hierarchal nature of her community college. She shared several examples of how well her colleagues worked as a team, the hands-on nature of their work, and the fact that senior-level cabinet members were accessible, visible, and engaged. On a personal level, Hillary offered this observation: "I do not have a fear of the organizational chart. I have never been chastised for speaking out . . . especially at a community college, you are representing students who may not have wi-fi, or have five or six kids at home." She was happy and comfortable in both a student-affairs role where students were at the center of her work, and also at an institution that was receptive and open to feedback and initiatives to address immediate student needs.

As a graduate student working part time in a community-college setting, Hillary noticed community-college work was not prevalent in her class discussions or in the program curriculum. She “definitely believes” community-college work is a subculture of the field: “Considering community college was a class I took for my graduate degree, that shows it is a microcosm in and of itself. Everything in my graduate program implied it was designed for the four-year [work]”. During her training, she also noticed community-college work was presented as akin to simply a functional area, as in “I want to work in advising, or I want to work in financial aid, or I want to work in a community college.” After working in a community college, she believes this low level of presence and visibility in her preparation may be due to a lack of research focused on what community colleges do, which may contribute to a “bias” or “bad reputation.” Hillary, drawing a conclusion between the field and her own previous bias about community colleges, summarized this by observing simply, “I think that maybe they are just not given a chance.”

Having learned how to work with a diverse population of community-college students through both her part-time and professional roles, Hillary offered the following straightforward insight to graduates of student-affairs programs who might be considering or transitioning into community-college work:

You have got to come back down to Earth. They [the students you will serve] have either been around, or they have kids your age, or they have bigger things they are here [at the college] for . . . they want correct information, they want you to help them, and want help with scholarships. They are just in a very different place. I have been humbled plenty of times.”

As our conversation came to a close, she left me with a final closing statement, directed at soon-to-be and recent graduates entering community-college work after completion of their master’s degree: “You’re about to be humbled by a 50-something-year-old woman who does not

want to hear about your BS about some student-development theory.” Without realizing it, I let out a small laugh followed by a sigh, picturing myself in the same type of scenario, more than 15 years ago, advising endless waves of devastated adults who were using unemployment funds to reluctantly enter higher education during the Recession. Hillary noticed, laughed at her comment, and sighed in acceptance, too.

Hillary’s experience of both graduate preparation and entry into community-college student-affairs work was unique from the other participants in that she experienced the events simultaneously, but she experienced her graduate program as it developed through her 4-year university lens, and having lacked discussion or exposure to community colleges as anything more than an alternative functional area. This concurrent experience with both part-time community-college work and pursuit of a program that did not formally cover community colleges as an institutional type illuminated for her misalignments between the two. Hillary noticed differences between the 4-year university and the community-college student-affairs culture in terms of the wider range of educational level in the community-college student-affairs culture and the value of that broader range; gaps in her ability to work with nontraditional student populations; the lower priority on diversity training and awareness within the community college, and the structural differences related to functional areas between the university and community-college student affairs. She challenged her internal beliefs about who community colleges served and developed strategies to strengthen her performance within the setting, which she referred to as “code switching” and focusing on student-centered practices. While Hillary drew much of her strategy from her personal growth and attitudes within Schlossberg’s (2008) 4S *self* domain, she also relied on the sense of community her peers with a similar training and background provided. Establishing this external community of practice within the institution

itself helped affirm what she noticed as “different” or “misaligned,” and it also provided a comfortable space within which she could examine disconnects and reconcile them to support her success within the culture. This level of external support served Hillary well during her transition, when she faced moments of frustration as a result of the disconnects she was experiencing at the time.

Emily: A Regional Campus Experience Ignites a Spark

Emily’s path to community-college student affairs began with a passion for education and was ignited further by her graduate-assistantship placement at a regional campus of a large, research university. Although Emily’s undergraduate experience was residential, liberal-arts focused, and at a private institution in her state’s capital city, her own rocky transition to a campus community helped her identify the challenges students are likely to face when they enter college. Growing up in a small, rural town she described as “the middle of nowhere,” Emily noted the jarring realities she faced when she was transitioning to a college campus in an urban area. It was this culture clash and difficult beginning to her college experience that led Emily to become an orientation leader during her third year at the university, opening up a pathway to consider student affairs as her future profession.

Upon completion of her undergraduate degree in education, Emily did not necessarily have her eyes set on graduate studies. However, as she searched employment opportunities, she experienced a pull toward positions connected to colleges and universities, and she determined that she may need to pursue a master’s degree to land an opportunity that would fulfill her desire to directly help others access and transition into college. This realization led her to apply to a graduate program in higher education leadership at a university several hours away. Emily specifically reflected on the graduate-assistantship interview experience the program facilitated

for incoming students, which introduced her to just how broad and diverse student-affairs work can be. One year after completion of her bachelor's degree, Emily found herself working as a student-services graduate assistant at a regional campus of the university and beginning her graduate coursework.

Emily described her graduate assistantship as the situational experience that “engaged and ignited” her sense of self, sharing “that is where the ‘aha’ moments happened” and she “fell in love with college access”. Although it was situational in nature, the experience also helped her develop a strong sense of self in terms of her commitment to college access and to supporting students entering college from close-knit, smaller communities. For Emily, the rural setting of the regional campus was a familiar environment in which to gain experiences working on college-access programs, where she helped local high-school students and adults consider what a college pathway might bring to their lives and future. As a support to the campus in a student-services assistantship, she described helping families navigate higher education terminology and financial aid, and make connections between the community, employers, local schools, and the campus.

In addition, Emily also specifically drew parallels between the regional campus work and what she learned in her graduate courses about what working in different types of institutions, including community colleges, might be like. Under the leadership of a supervisor who fulfilled multiple student-service roles at the small, rural, regional campus, Emily described her first observations of the demands of regional campus and community-college work: “At a community college, you end up doing it all. Particularly if you are good at what you do, you do everything. She [supervisor] always had to balance a lot of things.” Emily affectionately referred to this

introduction to broad job responsibilities later in the interview when we specifically discussed her professional work in a community-college setting.

This experiential component, in the form of her assistantship, was also complemented by what Emily described as the broad assistantship and practicum locations of her peers, which added diversity of perspective to her program's class discussions and curriculum. When asked about how community-college topics were woven into her graduate program experience, Emily spoke positively about her program's intentional efforts to place graduate students in different institutions around the region, bring diverse institutional experiences into the classroom, and illuminate organizational and mission-related aspects of public, private, for-profit, community-college, regional-campus, professional-school, and other organizational types of higher education.

Specifically, discussions about community colleges resonated with Emily because they seemed to parallel what she was experiencing at her regional campus assistantship: "We talked about how community colleges have to be more responsive to their community because often they are the bridge between the community needs and what skills and certifications are needed to actually get there [to fill community needs]." Emily, laughing, shared an example of how community college influenced the work of her graduate assistantship, recalling a request to quickly create a highly engaging, fun, week-long program to introduce local eighth graders to the world of insurance, in partnership with the local insurance business. Remembering how she struggled to fulfill the expectations of the students, school, community, employer, and her supervisor, she described this situation as representing her first experiences in thinking creatively and flexibly to meet community demands. She also attributed these experiences to the development of her personal strategy to facilitate complex community-college student-affairs

work because it nudged her to think creatively about how to meet expectations she jokingly described to her supervisor as “not having a realistic outcome.”

Although Emily’s passion for college access and her graduate-school experiences sparked interest in entering community-college work, she found entry into the 2-year sector to be more difficult than she had anticipated:

As much as I was interested in community colleges, I found it hard to see myself there, just because of the financial limitations of a part-time job. I felt like there were a lot of part-time jobs, a lot of entry-level jobs that maybe didn’t require a master’s degree.

Disappointed by the lack of full-time opportunities at community colleges during her job search, Emily accepted a position as a student-services generalist in the One-Stop center at a large, flagship university within the state. As she learned her role and the comprehensive financial-aid, enrollment, student-records, and admissions functions the One-Stop provided, she began to feel a sense of misalignment between the interest in college access she had developed during her graduate assistantship and the work she was performing at the university. She described one moment that helped her realize a change was needed:

There was a \$100 acceptance fee you [accepted students] had to pay within 2 weeks when they [*sic*] got accepted to the university. There would be students that would have earned full-ride scholarships once they were in the institution, but because they could not pay the \$100 acceptance fee and there was no grant or loan or anything for that, they could not come. It was just, like, “Well, if they cannot pay, there are 60 other students [on the waitlist] who will.”

Emily contrasted this experience within the university One-Stop with her graduate-school experiences, where she had come to know that other types of institutions may exert more flexibility or, as she stated it, “bend over backwards to try to make sure that we [student services] could help students every step of the way.” After 6 months in her first professional student-affairs role, Emily began a second job search. Focused within the region, geographic limitations

brought forward only two available opportunities: one in financial aid at her small, private, undergraduate institution, and a general student-services role geared toward supporting incoming students at the local community college.

Considering the two opportunities, Emily had already previously decided financial aid was a functional area in which she did not want to focus as a primary role. However, she described the community-college opportunity as

A sigh of relief because it felt so student-focused. Everything [about it] was about how is this [idea, decision, initiative] supporting or hurting our students, how can we help them work around barriers? That kind of stuff. It was a breath of fresh air to be able to actually put so much emphasis on student success because every institution talks about how they support student success and diversity and all that other stuff . . . but not all of them have a great way of how it actually works into their mission. I felt like every place I turned at [the community college to which she had applied], I was seeing things actually put into action for that.

Emily was offered the position and entered community-college student affairs, as a full-time employee this time, after her brief stint in the university One-Stop. In the new role, she was one of four new hires to the institution, each of whom was hired as part of a team to design a sustainable orientation program to meet the many populations the community college served. Under the leadership of another supportive supervisor, Emily shared that she had to strategize and “rethink” what the functional area of orientation programming looks like in different institutions, and she drew upon her undergraduate degree in education to apply “backwards design” principles to accommodate the needs of students who did not fit what is widely thought to be a college student profile. Emily described trying to find a balance between her own value and professional training related to education, especially working with adults who had been let go from their decades’ long work or felt forced to turn to the college as their only hope for a future. Poignantly, Emily reflected on this contrast:

To us [student-affairs professionals], we all see “look at all the different possibilities you can do with this degree or with this class or whatever experience it is”; but I also had to learn how to convince some other people to buy into that dream, too, because not everyone loves higher ed as much as we all do. I saw that particularly at the community-college level because if you’re not all that invested in it [education] . . . you’re going to start someplace that feels a bit more accessible [mentally] and go from there.”

Emily also shared her interest in and fondness for student-development theory as foundational to student-affairs work, but she specifically shared that working in a community college challenged her to think about the application of the theory. To Emily, the notion of subculture resonated: “How they [community colleges] think about things, however they go about doing things, is all different than a more traditional institution.” Distinct interpretations of her experience of community-college culture included more observable student-focused practice, time constraints of working in a rapidly fluctuating college setting, last-minute preparation, and the required high degree of flexibility and helpfulness when working with students. She also noted that, while trying to meet a highly diverse set of student needs, she had to learn quickly how to creatively acquire resources without passing costs onto students—a common financial-management strategy that she recalled was sometimes used in the other types of institutions she had learned about.

Despite her passion for the work, Emily’s 14-month experience working professionally in a community college recently came to a close as the result of her decision to follow her partner to a different region of the state. Based primarily on personal circumstances, she accepted a role working with graduate students at a 4-year university in the area to which they relocated, and she was viewing this shift as an opportunity to take advantage of access to the university’s PhD program. Emily added, “This is an opportunity I could not access working at the community college.” Emily’s long-term career plans included earning her doctorate degree, engaging in

education-related research, and one day partnering with community colleges through the development of her own nonprofit organization.

In closing her narrative, Emily took a few more moments to share an experience she described as “the epitome of community college student affairs.” With a knowing smile, I listened intently as she described a lengthy and complete interaction with a student and his mother during the college’s orientation program. The student and his mother were singularly focused on putting together a schedule, though several highly individualized factors had generated an overwhelming array of decision points along the way, including potential transfer plans, desire to avoid developmental education courses, and deciding between a technical or general associate-degree option offered in the same field. Emily’s description led me through a weaving path of evaluating bureaucratic policies and making decisions regarding financial-aid options, reviewing multiple credential levels within the same discipline, predicting how the student’s academic plans would transfer to as many universities as possible several years into the future, and explaining the difference between applied associates degrees and those designed to fulfill general education requirements. The jargon she used during this story was familiar and needed no explanation for me as the researcher (*dev-ed, applied, transfer, traditional, direct from high school*), terms that are central to initial intake advising in many community-college settings. She looked at me from the Zoom screen after describing her experience for several minutes, paused, smiled, and closed with “It’s just hard to switch your brain [from] who you think your students are. . . then also just how programs, finances work . . . you have to change how you’re thinking about it, how you’re interacting with people, what questions you’re asking, and where you are coming from.

The story illustrates, from Emily's experience, the complex nature of individual student needs, especially upon entry, within a community college. In Emily's experience, multiple pathways, degree types, preparation for transfer articulation, and scheduling classes all became more complex when working in a culture designed to serve the student and community and therefore that was challenged to facilitate anything as a "one-size-fits-all" process. She later added that she and her colleagues had attempted to streamline the check-in process for orientation, but that the highly individualized nature of each and every student presenting at check-in challenged them to facilitate it in a way that did not create logistical bottlenecks: "There were just all these things [in the community college] that you can't really have a check-in conversation about when I ask you [a student] what your major is."

The stories Emily shared illustrate her experiences with trial and error within the community college, where she described constant "testing" of dominant culture ideas and concepts. In her experience, this aspect was related mostly to coordinating orientation and onboarding, given her role and program oversight. These specific experiences revealed to her how much individualization and agility is needed to create accessible and streamlined programs that can support such a wide range of student needs, from high-school dual enrollment, to transfer, to workforce entry, to developmental education, to adult education and everything in between.

Emily certainly experienced disconnects between graduate school and her work in community-college student affairs, such as community colleges' highly adaptable nature, student and local centeredness, and the misfit with student development theories she had thought she might apply more regularly. Her short experience working at a university provided her with a

firsthand glimpse of the cultural contrasts she had already suspected might be present between dominant higher education culture and the community college.

Emily's previous knowledge and experience from her perception of her graduate programs' focus on institutional type as "formal," her community-college internships, and her graduate assistantship served as her primary resources from which she developed internal strategies to adapt. Internally, Emily used these experiences as frames to make meaning of what she was experiencing, and also to inform her approach when she encountered a cultural element that needed adjustment to fit community-college students' needs. Her supervisor and peers served as key external supports for her during this time; they also were instrumental in connecting her to community-college work as a setting that aligned well with her values.

Katy: Coordinating the Help Everyone Needs

Katy's story is a profound reminder of the students served by higher education whose needs and challenges are often overlooked and not fully understood. As a low-income, traditional-age, undergraduate student, Katy drifted silently away from a state university after 2 years, struggling to make ends meet while she lived on campus, and weighed down by concern for her own family's housing insecurity and financial strains. Now a community-college student-affairs professional, Katy described her undergraduate experience this way: "I didn't have a meal plan or job, [was] trying to keep deli meat cool on the air conditioner in my room, [had] no blankets, no computer . . . I was lost in all the ways first-generation students are lost transitioning into an unknown world."

Several years after she had withdrawn from that university, was living in a tent, and was reflecting during a lunch break on what may have gone wrong in her pursuit of higher education, Katy contacted the university she had attended. She had identified some of the areas she thought

she may have prompted her to veer off course, and she wanted a second chance to live on campus, focus on courses, and get back on track. At the age of 22, Katy moved back on campus and eventually began working as a front-desk clerk in one of the residence halls, where she remembered being identified as someone having what another staff member coined the “X factor.” This referred to her potential for student-affairs work and helping others overcome their challenges pursuing education. Her career in education did not initially launch in student affairs. For a number of years, Katy had taught high school after completing her bachelor’s degree and before she pursued graduate work:

I got really interested in the transition from high school to college, and I know that the majority of my experiences had been on the secondary-school side. To fully understand the transition and do something to improve it, I needed to get to the other side [postsecondary education].

Concerned about moving from full-time teacher salary and into 2 years of graduate school, Katy engaged in deep research about graduate programs for higher education leadership. She approached the search for a graduate program with two priorities in mind: The program had to guarantee her a graduate assistantship to help with costs, and it needed to include a variety of diverse experiences that could help her network and ease her fears about securing a job upon graduation. She was drawn to a program at a state university that fulfilled both criteria, and she was especially drawn to the program’s specialty certificate offerings in academic advising and community-college leadership.

In addition to earning her master’s degree, Katy fulfilled requirements to earn both certificates, and the experiences led her to consider community colleges as a place to begin her postsecondary leadership career. Katy felt connected to the mission and demographics of community colleges because they served “the students who had backgrounds like the one I came from. They [community-college students] were more likely to be first generation, low-income,

and looking for some sort of direction. I felt I could make the biggest difference there.” While Katy felt drawn to the community-college mission, she admitted she was not able until now, as a professional, to clearly articulate the kinship she felt with community-college students and the institutions themselves.

One particular graduate-school experience remained the most influential factor in Katy’s decision to think critically about the type of institution in which she wanted to work after graduation. During one of her general courses, Katy was introduced to the book *Where You Work Matters* (Hirt, 2006), which provides an overview of student-affairs functions and experiences across institutional types. In reading and discussing this book in class, Katy vividly remembered the exact moment, assignment, and chart that helped her to understand that her career choice would be deeper than just selecting to go into student affairs. Rather, she began to understand that it would be important to consider the culture of certain types of institutions, alignment to her sense of self, and to determine her best fit and where she would feel the most personally fulfilled within the postsecondary educational landscape. That emphasis on self and internal awareness led Katy to deepen her exploration and curiosity about institutional types and the students they serve. She recalled the moment she realized it would be important to identify the culture in which she would best fit, and how critical doing that would be in fostering personal fulfillment and professional success. She noted that the book “put words and an actual chart to the feelings I was having, what I valued, and the challenges I was willing to overcome in nailing down the culture I was drawn to [related to certain schools and not others].” Katy described the experience clearly: “. . . read a section that explicitly said, ‘we [the student-affairs program] train practitioners as students of 4-year universities to be graduate students at 4-year universities to

work at 4-year universities.” She added, “At that point, that had been my experience, and it was a really eye-opening statement [about examining different types of institutions].”

With that new perspective in mind, and pursuing the community-college leadership certificate, Katy completed practicum experiences in a large, urban, community-college enrollment center and a financial-aid department in a regional campus setting. Still focused on ensuring that she had experiences that would lead to as many opportunities as possible to secure employment, she also completed a practicum in career counseling at a private, suburban college. Despite Katy’s passion and the connection she felt to community-college work, her father’s illness served as a major factor in her job search. Limited to a geographic boundary of 5 hours by car, she accepted a full-time residence-life position to provide her with a steady salary, a place to live, and the ability to take her father to medical appointments once per month.

As her dad became increasingly ill throughout the first year in her position, Katy began another job search, this time much closer to her father and based on the situational factors at hand. Limited geographically, her search lasted several months, until she stumbled upon her current role. The position was located at a community college near her father’s home, encompassed nearly every aspect of student services and support, and resulted in a pay cut from her residence-life position. With her father in mind, she accepted the new position and leveraged her previous practicum experiences to quickly learn a vast portfolio of student-affairs functions in only a few short months on the job. Supported by a supervisor who shared her personal background as a first-generation, low-income student, Katy relied on her to understand the broad oversight of her role. Compared to other roles and experiences in which she had experienced about a year of transition before feeling completely comfortable in the new organization, Katy experienced her learning curve at the community college as much shorter. Within only a few

months and by asking questions, she was able to independently work across all functional areas, including admissions, enrollment, advising, financial aid, marketing, accessibility services, and academic-affairs support. During our conversation, Katy used humor to comment on the expansiveness of her multifaceted student-services role:

I joke with students and other folks alike that it would not surprise me if you came to campus and I was writing parking tickets one day. I'm joking; but genuinely, if it happened I would not be at all surprised. Just another day in my role,

Katy shared unique observations of the community-college culture and environment, but she also noted on several occasions how well the discussions in the class that read *Where You Work Matters* prepared her for what she encountered. First, she noted the cadence of her work, which she experienced as “completely dead periods where I cannot seem to get students to engage, and then periods of just madness.” Similarly, she noticed how student-engagement strategies to which she had been introduced in graduate school did not work with the community-college students. She described student engagement as follows:

It [student engagement] is a totally different ballgame. You come in thinking about live-on [live-on-campus] students, and that students are there for the culture [of engagement] that you're trying to build at the institution. Trying to get students to engage with me [at the community college] when they just come to campus, take their classes, and go straight back to their car, and on a campus that has very few buildings, I can't even catch them outside because they're literally only going from their car to one building and right back. So I have 10 feet to try to catch them in between their car and their classroom . . . Yeah, boy; that's definitely a unique subset of college students.

To Katy, three specific misalignments between her graduate-school experience and the community-college setting were most notable: (a) the role of workforce development, (b) the territory concerns that define institutional reach, and (c) a surprising lack of focus on diversity training. Primarily, she described workforce development as an aspect of community-college culture that “completely blew my mind; it was the most surprising thing.” Throughout her time

preparing to enter higher education as a professional, she could recall only one brief conversation that focused on how colleges align academic programs to workforce needs, determine what programs to offer, and how those decisions are made. While working in a community college, she saw firsthand how connected the college's offerings were to the dynamic and changing needs of the local area, and she witnessed how the college established intentional and nontraditional pipelines to connect students to fields not always found in traditional, 4-year college offerings. Katy expressed fascination with the fact that individuals who would benefit most from workforce programs might not access the opportunities at all, perhaps because they viewed the community college as too closely aligned to traditional higher education to be of benefit to their learning styles, career plans, and training needs.

In addition to a new focus on and fascination with the intersection between workforce and college access, Katy also experienced one complexity of localization. Prior to joining a community college as a student-affairs professional, she had not been prepared for the political nature of service areas, boundaries, and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that formalized the college's interactions with the community and institutions in neighboring counties. Describing these types of agreements as "very territorial" and complicated due to regional campuses, county-specific colleges, and concerns about encroachment into areas served by others.

Like Hillary, Katy described experiencing divergence between her graduate preparation and experience in other institutions, and the limited extent to which professional development, specifically on the on the topic of diversity, is provided within the college-community context. In contrast, she described previous experiences in which "we talked diversity constantly. We were going to diversity conferences, webinars, all very involved in different professional

organizations; and that just does not exist [within the community college].” Although Katy noted some of this observation might be explained by the lack of budget for professional development, she also admitted that she sensed little interest in professional development among her colleagues, and often wondered why this might be the case.

Katy’s current daily work was diverse, fast-paced, broad in scope, and highly collaborative. It included a myriad of other individuals and departments, a tapestry of student support and problem-solving. As she explained, “Students need a lot of social, emotional, and academic guidance. So it takes all of these different people, all of these different departments, to make that happen for each student.” In sharing about the workday she experienced prior to our conversation, she spoke of a packed day filled with a flurry of tasks, interactions, Zoom advising appointments, complex problem solving, department meetings, student crises, service complaints, missing paperwork, mysterious student registration holds, FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) reminders, tutoring referrals, faculty consults, math and English placements, a new scheduling system, and more. As she described the chaos she managed during the day, she also frequently and transparently shared her decision-making and prioritization activities, noting decision points such as “...so I am figuring that out as I am heading out the door. Then I get a message asking when I am available for tutoring, and I cannot handle that right now; that is going to have to wait.” In sharing her day with me, her voice was calm but rapid as she listed her efforts. She wrapped up her summary of the day, and described how she experienced her daily work:

My head is swirling of a million things . . . I am always in the mode of thinking, “but what questions are they [students] going to have next? What are they going to need I have not thought of? How can I think ahead now to navigate a problem they are going to have to deal with later? Because if we can go ahead now and figure that out for then while I’ve got them on the phone, or while I’m in the right headspace to do that, let’s just do it now, and that helps them and then it helps me. . .

Despite the broad functional knowledge and effort clearly reflected in Katy's matter-of-fact summary of her day, she finished up her comments by sharing with me that "The easiest part, I think, is just how welcoming, gracious, and thankful the students are." She appeared to relax after that statement, as though her swirling head, chaotic day, and being stretched far too thin in her comprehensive role were all a distant memory instead of just hours prior. I also knew she would be getting up in the morning to do it all again, and I thought of my own team's dedication to navigating complex systems and decisions so that students, with so much on their plates, do not necessarily have to do so.

One additional insight Katy provided remained in my mind beyond the conclusion of our time together, likely because it is something I have heard myself say about my work serving students, colleagues, parents, other teams, and even community members. Katy captured what I too have come to understand about the nature of collaboration in community colleges. She wrapped it up perfectly while describing the culture and her perceived role within it: "Everybody wants feedback and help and assistance. Students need help, teachers need help, tutors need help . . . everybody needs help here."

Katy's description highlights certain gaps in her experiences of graduate preparation and community-college student affairs as separate, but related, cultures. She made subtle references to subculture throughout her narrative, and classified community college as "somewhat" of a subculture because of its high prevalence of students who are considered "subsets" in other forms of higher education. She noted the student population as "overwhelmingly niche," and described differences in the levels of professional development, workforce alignment considerations, high levels of collaboration, and the broad and extensive nature of her work across student-affairs functional areas. Like Hillary, Katy was largely supported by her own

internal values and the strategies she had developed using her previous life experiences and knowledge she had gained in graduate school. She found camaraderie in the community-college environment, which served as a strong external support as she transitioned into the culture much more quickly than she had when she began her first professional role in residence life. A supportive relationship with her supervisor and work that necessitated departments working together were key to her quick assimilation.

Isabella: Finding Comfort in a Community-College Role

Isabella came from a long line of educators, which drew her into a special-education major at the commuter campus she attended for her bachelor's degree. As graduation neared, she reflected upon all of the experiences she had as an undergraduate student, which included working in the admissions office, supporting academic advising functions, and an internship with a Student Success Coach. In summary, Isabella shared, "I guess I should have looked at all the experiences I had and known that [student affairs] was where I should go."

Isabella entered a graduate program for student affairs at the midyear point. Although she needed to pursue special permission to get into the courses and begin the program in an off cycle, she had highly supportive advisors and mentors who helped crystallize her career choice. Despite beginning her courses midyear, she also was placed in a graduate assistantship in the graduate-studies office, where she began to learn about other sides of higher education administration she had not yet experienced. She contributed the broadening of her knowledge of student-affairs functions to her assistantship and both of her internships, which happened to be hosted by two different community colleges. Isabella explained that although her internship placements in community colleges were not intentional, she had planned to complete at least one of them simply to see what differences might exist between types of institutions. Her second community-

college internship was sudden and unexpected, when a university that was experiencing rapid changes canceled her practicum experience at the last minute.

Isabella described herself as someone who initially comes across as shy and reserved, and for whom the “feel” and comfort of an environment was important. Her personal connection to community colleges as a form of higher education was through a positive experience through high-school dual enrollment, when she took classes at the community college nearest to her home during her junior and senior years of high school. She recalled enjoying the small class sizes and having professors who knew her name and continued to communicate with her after their courses concluded. Isabella recalled that her time at a community college, although it was limited and not as a degree-seeking student, as a time in which she received high levels of individualized attention and felt comfortable opening up.

Similar to Hillary’s concurrent experience and Katy’s “Aha!” moments learning about institutional types, Isabella shared disconnects that she had experienced while simultaneously working in a community-college internship and taking classes in her graduate program. Over time, she began to notice that her classes were focused on student affairs and organizational dynamics in the 4-year university setting or at larger institutions than those in which she was personally immersed. Eventually, she took a course her graduate program offered that focused on community colleges, which she enthusiastically described as a supportive factor: “I got to take an entire class and see if it perfectly aligned with what I was doing. It’s really nice that I can find where my classes aligned with the community college [internship experience].” Aside from her internship, the community-college course served as the primary environment in which she learned concrete information about how community colleges are set up and who they serve. Isabella commented positively about the course, and observed, “I liked having those differences

pointed out because it made them concrete. Some of the [differences] are not huge, but they're enough to make a difference in where you are working."

Isabella also observed that nearly all of her classmates were intending to seek employment at a 4-year institution, and that career counseling and advising were two of the most desirable functional areas among her cohort. Admittedly, Isabella knew that she and most of her classmates simply had their eyes set on securing a job after graduation. In the early stages of graduate school, Isabella had dreamed of returning to her undergraduate institution, but her perspective shifted slightly as she was exposed to what community colleges had to offer:

I still knew most of the people that work there. So I wanted to go back to those people. Because my professors from my freshman year and the chancellor still knew me by first name, they remember you. And they made such a big impact on me, I would have loved to get back. But then, I had a community-college course. And that's what started to show me how much more there was at a community college.

Despite changing course, Isabella's undergraduate experience at a nonresidential university provided her with a unique insight into methods to create connection and engage students who did not live on a college campus. She provided a glowing account of her undergraduate experience, illustrating an environment that was welcoming, open, and engaging through sports, homecoming events, frequent free food, T-shirt giveaways, and a campus-life experience that helped the campus feel connected. During her job search, Isabella focused on opportunities that would allow her to remain in close proximity to her family and also facilitate a sense of connection, familiarity, and comfort within a smaller environment as she began her career. Although she had hoped for full-time employment after completing her master's degree, she also noticed that many institutions were canceling searches and cutting budgets in the acute response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the pandemic's impact on higher education and her job search, Isabella took a chance on accepting a part-time, enrollment-specialist position at one

of the community colleges at which she had completed an internship. Still within her first year in the job and hopeful the role would evolve into full-time, Isabella was content in a role that had allowed her to remain near her family and gain professional experiences.

In the early stages of her transition to community-college work, she found an environment filled with familiar faces and elements that reminded her of her undergraduate institution, which she found comforting: “The atmosphere [working at the community college] is very welcoming and very open to new things and open to ideas.” Similar to the environment she experienced as an undergraduate, Isabella found that the community-college environment facilitated easy connection, noticing that

they [students] share a lot more with you. And I feel like that is something they do at a community college because they feel closer to the people. And they have told me that, too, saying things like “I like this college because I feel like I can connect with the staff.”

As a new professional in a community-college student-affairs role, Isabella noticed some cultural differences to which she was still adjusting. For example, fully understanding how each role connects to one another had proven to be an early challenge, and also where her role stopped and a colleague’s began. She described the general student-services unit in which she worked as “they [the department] commit to anything. We’re answering questions about almost anything for a student who is entering the college or is already taking classes.”

At the same time, Isabella also described understanding and expecting that she would need to do more than one thing in a community-college role, that expectations were ambiguous, and that the scope of the role was continually changing. She shared that she began to develop this awareness in graduate school, and had collected experiences in which she had been able to witness firsthand the differences between student affairs in different environments. She shared an assumption she had internalized during graduate school, that university departments likely

display teamwork within the unit. But in contrast, Isabella described the culture she was experiencing: “But at a community college, the teamwork is everybody, in every department, everywhere.”

For Isabella, both experiencing and learning about community colleges during graduate school was beneficial as she came to understand teamwork as a key part of her broad role. This previous exposure had helped her see herself as an emerging student-affairs professional for whom the community-college culture was a good fit. Both her internships and the community-college course she took had also helped her to interpret and make meaning of the extremely broad nature of her enrollment-specialist job. Her internships and graduate school preparation shifted her mindset away from the 4-year college, her alma mater, where she had originally envisioned herself working:

But then, I had a community-college course. And that's what started to show me how much more there was at a community college. And it's because I had more experience [as an intern] with the regional community-college campus that is near my hometown. I just saw the front desk people and the professors, and I saw people doing advising, front-desk duties, admissions, all of it. So, for me, it seemed very small. And then, I had that [community-college] class. And that class was taught by someone who worked at a community college part-time and [taught] our evening course. And that started to shift my focus: “Okay, they do have the same positions a 4-year university does; they just might do more than just that one duty that they are assigned in that position.”

For Isabella, a personal desire to connect with her environment and feel a sense of welcome is what originally sparked her interest in pursuing student affairs as a career option, largely informed by the culture her undergraduate institution had created. Isabella’s story is full of references to her family and their importance in her life, and also the connections she made while attending a unique 4-year college that focused on engagement and supporting nonresidential students.

Slowly, her graduate-school experiences inside and outside of the classroom opened her eyes to institutional type and culture, and they brought forward one experience that was aligned with her desire to connect with students in a meaningful way. While still early in her transition, Isabella had found a home in community-college culture where she could recreate the level of support she experienced as an undergraduate and apply that experience to students who benefit from personal attention. Several months in, she said of her role, “What I have noticed about this one [institution] is that they focus on making connections, and they [this college, my colleagues] all focus on getting to know the students and making connections with them.”

Isabella’s story illustrates both personal and environmental factors that helped her not only to find a home in student-affairs work, but also to adapt quickly as a result of the previous assumptions she had already confirmed about the broad work, interconnectedness, and student populations present in a community college. Engaging with Isabella, especially so early in her career, I found myself thinking about her future in community-college student affairs. With compassion, an eye for learning and agility, and a deep connection to the environments in which she finds a natural place, Isabella will be likely to shine in her role and find even deeper connections to the community her college serves as her transition continues.

Emerging Themes

Each of the five participant stories reflects a uniquely woven tapestry of life, educational, and professional experiences from which we can examine elements of cultural differences and factors that support transition. Despite each story’s presentation of unique facets of lived experiences, a number of themes emerged as salient across the participants’ experiences. In addition, one specific colloquialism (“especially in community colleges”) was explicitly present in three participant narratives, and thus is included as an emergent theme in addition to related,

yet less overt, moments when participants qualified community college as relative to a separate, broader, or different culture. Themes related to broad and adaptive roles, graduate preparation as a frame for meaning making, the localized nature of community-college work, navigation of the organizational dynamics, and the importance of “doing work that matters” each emerged, to some extent, across participant stories. These emergent themes align with the study’s inquiry into separate but related cultures, and the external and internal factors that support individuals’ transition between those cultures. Emergent themes within this section, and their connection to the study’s guiding questions, provide the foundation for comparison and integration with existing literature, and reflect areas for deeper exploration in Chapter 5.

Experience of Community Colleges As Culturally Unique

Each of the five participants identified unique elements of community-college culture that were met with surprise or for which they needed some level of strategy, navigation, or support to reconcile with what they had learned in other educational contexts, specifically in graduate school. These differences, while individually interpreted, brought forth emerging themes that began to frame the institutional type as culturally unique based on their lived experiences working within it.

Broad and Adaptive Roles

Across every participants’ story, themes of generalist work and “wearing multiple hats,” stories of quick pivots, and their experiences with an unexpected function or fluid job description emerged. Indeed, the five participants in the story present a collective viewpoint of community-college student-affairs work as ever changing, complex, agile, collaborative, integrated, and highly student centered. The five participants shared stories and insights into the flexible, agile, student-centered and responsive nature of

community-college student affairs, in contrast to the [narrower, more singular?] focus of the environment in which they had received professional training.

Hillary described her constant pivoting to connect with students of all ages and backgrounds as “code-switching.” When prompted for a story she believed encompassed a day in community-college student affairs, Katy launched into a high-energy description of the workday that had ended just prior to our interview, punctuated throughout by fast-paced, student-level coordination across nearly every unit at her college. Emily noticed that community-college student-affairs roles listed far more functional areas of responsibility and oversight than the one to two areas that were associated with university-based positions. Describing community-college student-affairs work, Isabella reflected on her role, saying that “It just feels like you’re doing everything from before they even apply until when they graduate.”

Further illustrating the natural flexibility and acceptance of ambiguity, the participants’ short anecdotes and clues about the multiple “hats” they wore were sometimes peppered throughout the narratives as side comments and often presented with a tone of lighthearted laughter: In a previous section, I shared Katy’s comment about issuing parking tickets one day, and Ematha had casually incorporated this side comment into a response about an unrelated topic:

. . . I was working on developing a class for financial literacy because I’m also the coordinator of our money-management center. Didn’t know that when I signed up for this job, but okay. One of those other “duties as assigned” I got stuck with from another center. . .

Although themes of agility, breadth of service and knowledge, and high levels of flexibility merged as present in the participants’ lived experiences as community-college professionals, they were also present when the participants were sharing their personal strategies for working with the community-college student population. Within the context of their

individual roles, all five participants described, a high level of student centeredness and the need to adapt student-affairs practices to connect with such a wide range of students. Both Emily and Hillary expressed their interest as students in student-development theory, but they shared examples of how their previous training in this area mismatched what they encountered when helping diverse students sort through complex financial, employment, and family situations:

I find myself burning out just because it gets frustrating to have to talk to, I don't know how to say this, older people and 18-year-olds at the same time. It's like a form of code switching. I can talk to these 18-year-olds the way I talk to my little brother who's the same age; but I also have to talk to these 50-year-old people, 60-year-old people, and they're looking to me for guidance. [Hillary]

You have to change how you're thinking about it, how you're interacting with people, what questions you're asking, and where you're coming from. Because while you have the student development theory in your head and you're like, "Oh, I should ask them about their hopes and dreams and what kinds of the things they'd like to do." And then the student's like, "No, I have 5 minutes. I'm on my lunch break. I got to go." So you just have to be prepared for that dramatically different culture sometimes because it's a little bit of a shock at first. [Emily]

You have some [students] that are fresh out of high school and are coming here because it's cheaper than going straight into school, because it was more convenient, and you have some that couldn't get into a 4-year institution. You have some that are single parents, some that lost their jobs, some that are like, "I don't know. I just got bored in my job and wanted to do something different." There's just a much wider variety in the students that you have to take care of, and they come with so much more in their background. [Emily]

In her transition to community-college work, Isabella picked up on student-centeredness as a core commitment in her institution, and she also quickly noticed the flexibility with which the student services pivot to address student needs:

They [many students] have to come later in the day. And we're flexible with that, and "come on in whenever you can, make an appointment for whenever you have time." Some of them have other jobs, some of them have kids, families. . . . if they [students] can't really get away from home or office but they have enough of a break to make a phone call or do a video conference, we can do that. But if they really just need to talk to someone in person, we can do that, too.

Ematha described the breadth of community-college student-affairs work from her perspective, which illustrated the need to acquire a broad skillset to support adult learners, in addition to her primary role as a career-services manager:

. . . they [community-college students] might come, and they might be having a really rough day. or they might call you crying on the phone. I've had that, where I'd help the student with their resumé; then she really needed financial assistance, but she kept calling me. They make that personal connection and then you're their main contact. No matter what they're needing. It's just how it ends up. They need somebody that loves them and cares for them. Because like I said, average age is 25. Most of our students aren't home with their parents anymore. They might not have that support system. They might have a spouse and kids depending on them.

Of course, participants described the high level of adaptation and breadth of work as a notable challenge to be negotiated during their transition, identifying this theme as one of the ways in which the participants had experienced graduate preparation and community-college work as two separate, but related, cultures. One perspective from Katy, however, illustrates the broad knowledge she needed to flex in her generalist role, but also notes the cross-functional nature of her work as creating ease in her transition:

I don't need to figure out what the financial-aid office is doing and who's running the show, and what their motivations are because I kind of am the financial-aid office in some ways, or at least very involved in it; so that setup also sped things [training] along.

She compared her transition to community college as far shorter than her transition into her first professional role in housing, which took nearly a year before she felt fully acclimated to all of the individual departments with which she had to interact.

Similarly, Isabella described the adaptability and vastness within her enrollment-specialist role as an asset to her transition: “you [new employee] just get right into what you’re supposed to do,” adding, “There wasn’t anybody like ‘Are you sure you can do this?’ because they think you can already. And if you aren’t sure how to do it, they are ready to help you do it.”

Adaptation, agility, flexibility, and broad roles mark one of the themes that emerged quickly in the study. Individual participants, of course, drew from different factors that supported their resolution of this challenge and their ability to adapt to roles that they perceived as exceptionally broad, student-centered, fast-paced, and responsive to local, student, and institutional needs. The manner in which each participant resolved this notable difference informs the second and third research questions, which explore the external and internal factors that supported the participants' personal transitions between graduate school and their professional work in community-college settings.

Localization

Localization as a characteristic unique to the community-college culture was present throughout several participant stories, and it brings forth another difference individuals experience as they transition from graduate-school preparation and entry into the separate, but related, culture of community-college student affairs. The impact of localization on their work was a strong theme throughout Ematha's story, but it emerged in Hillary and Katy's experiences as well. Also of note, Emily developed a strong understanding of community colleges' local focus from her supervisor, a mentor from whom she learned about cultural elements of the local Appalachian community the campus served.

The institution in which Ematha worked as a professional explicitly named its commitment and connection to its local community, into which Ematha was quickly accepted and assimilated. She described her college's intentional efforts to understand and respond to the local community, its struggles with poverty, and the needs of its local employers to build a local economy after downturns. Describing the students she served as coming to the college from "the warzone of poverty," Ematha translated this into her work by continually asking herself, "What

can I do to better serve our community and our employers?” She added, “It’s all about the students, but to help the students you have to have those employer relations. It all gets connected.”

Katy, too, experienced one element of localization as “the most surprising thing” during her transition into community-college work. During her interview, Katy shared that learning about the workforce-development practices within community colleges “blew her mind.” She described learning of the intersection between local employers, training programs, economic-development stakeholders, and the college as “something I had not had any experience in, and I did not know anybody at that point who had experience in it [workforce development].” She described this newfound awareness as opening her eyes to “a whole other subset of people, especially as we think about college and career readiness.”

Emily, while describing the minimal resources with which she had to work to develop new programs for students, noted that leveraging local resources was one avenue she had unlocked to gain financial support. She attributed local businesses, grants, and networking as methods to ensure costs for additional programs and services were not passed on to the students at her large, urban, community college. Emily’s story earlier in the chapter also details her experience in working with K-through-12 districts, local employers, and gaining an appreciation for a supervisor who was well versed in the local cultural norms and views of education present in the community they served.

Although the localized nature of each of the community colleges the participants described was largely viewed in a positive light, some complexities that derived from localization also emerged in the narratives. Katy described memorandums of understanding (MOUs) as a common bureaucratic step in her community-college environment because they

establish defined service areas and the scope of collaboration, and they decrease overlap between the community college and other local institutions competing for the same students. Hillary described tensions between the two campuses of her community college, both designed to serve the county as the same institution but competing for “campus-level” enrollment. To some extent, the nuances of the local communities each college served appeared throughout each narrative.

“Especially at Community Colleges”

To explore the concept of transition as it relates to two separate, but related, cultures of graduate preparation and community-college student affairs, the extent to which participants defined the contexts relative to one another becomes important. An emergent theme began to surface across the narratives, elicited both by explicit inquiry into the concept of subculture as it related to community colleges and also in the subtle manner in which participants shed light on community colleges as “relative” to other institutional types or somehow different from the larger context of higher education in which they are situated.

During interviews, each participant was explicitly asked to reflect on community colleges as a subculture of higher education, and also on the perceived level of the relationship and membership of community colleges to the community-college culture itself. This question prompted perspectives ranging from affirmation of community colleges as a subculture of higher education (Hillary, Emily, Isabella) to a partial acceptance of this nomenclature (Katy), to denial and redefinition (Ematha, who referred to the culture as a *co-culture*, noting that the *sub* label can be interpreted as beneath other forms of higher education). Regardless of whether or not there was explicit personal agreement with the term itself, all five participants shared subtle references to cultural elements that separate community colleges from other institutional types.

However, one specific, subtle colloquialism surfaced in Ematha, Emily, and Hillary's narratives: "*especially at community colleges*" appeared as an emphatic qualifier of their observations on a variety of topics. Ematha used this qualifier to describe her efforts to increase student and employer engagement to better serve her student population; she noted a cultural mismatch between the individual previously in her role and the college's poverty-informed career preparation services. Separately, and within her own interview, Emily used a variation of the same phrase ("*particularly at community colleges*") to describe something different about the impact student-affairs professionals can have on the student population in community colleges. Hillary also used this phrase to emphasize her perspectives on the importance of administrators remaining close to student needs and experiences to fully exert strong leadership ("*especially in a community college*").

This emerging theme aligns with and supports a relative relationship between graduate-school preparation, higher education as a whole, and community-college culture. The prevalence of this theme across the participants' narrative both validates *subculture* as one of two constructs upon which the study was formed and provides a clearer perspective of how participants differentiated one context from another.

Interacting With Organizational Dynamics

Of particular note in this study are areas of participants' experienced misalignment or congruence between graduate-school preparation and its related, but separate, culture of community colleges as an institutional type. When describing aspects of both community-college culture and transitional experiences, each participant shared, to some extent, observations related to organizational dynamics. This content included references to flat organizational charts, high levels of crossover and collaboration across units, job classifications and configurations, and

professional development. In addition, several participants shared encounters with resource strains, which they felt unprepared to navigate.

Though not explicitly stated or defined as such, three participants described flat organizational dynamics that placed them in close proximity to executive leadership. Hillary and Ematha both described the positive impact of this dynamic, describing highly collaborative environments in which they felt empowered to email, text, or consult with vice presidents and the president at their institutions. This was especially unique to Ematha and Hillary, both of whom described their graduate-school experiences as focused on higher education politics, structure, and administration.

As a theme, participants integrated flat organizational dynamics with other observations, too. For example, Ematha observed her career ladder to be relatively short, with only the roles of vice president and president above the role in which she entered the field. She explained, however, that she had noticed that fast-paced, student-centered work that was associated with those who wished to simply “climb the ladder” may not align well with the culture. Hillary shared a similar sentiment, explaining that her institution placed high value on work output and performance, even over educational attainment. For Hillary, this emphasis had become a source of frustration, given her graduate preparation for higher education leadership and student affairs. However, she also demonstrated assimilation into the culture by boldly announcing her interest in a full-time role and dedicating several months to achieving outcomes that led to her promotion.

For Hillary and Isabella, who also observed a more integrated and flattened organizational culture, this scenario meant that commonly understood student-affairs roles did not necessarily show up in their community college’s organizational charts. Isabella shared that

job searches and students who transfer between institutions may require additional research because “they [community colleges] do not have the same people, or the same positions, to address that [functional area or student service].” For Hillary, the flat organizational dynamics she perceived meant she was not able to lean into the specialized function she found most fascinating during graduate school, which was work in community standards:

I find that to be very interesting because we don’t have that [community standards] at the community-college level. We don’t really have a community-standards and student-responsibilities department or anything like that. But I know that is something I foresee on my path.

Across all of the interviews, participants also shared their observations of human resources management within the organizational dynamics, including the processes of promotion, hiring, and educational attainment, and the prevalence of part-time opportunities over full-time ones:

My boss is on the Cabinet, and she only has a bachelor’s degree. But she has taken our workforce program that we have; and it was a \$100,000 program, and now it’s a million-dollar program. It’s like she is really good at the workforce side of things. That’s what gave her leadership power. Do I see things wrong with that? Yes, because of how I feel about having degrees and things like that; but I also respect the hustle...[Hillary]

He [colleague] wanted to climb the ladder and he ended up going to a local university. He went to a university for a year so he could climb the ladder. That’s the thing. That’s what you can do there you can’t do here. I’m not going anywhere. And that’s not my goal. I don’t want to climb. That’s not the purpose.” [Ematha]

It’s nothing for me to send an email to the CFO or the president; it doesn’t seem like they’re that out of touch. And on the middle-management level, you work better as a team. You can be sure to send a student to somebody and know that they’re going to get help. [Hillary]

Throughout the interviews, several participants described either perceptions of or personal experiences with barriers to accessing full-time employment at a community college.

Katy's observations were derived from an internal perspective, from within the institution in which she currently works:

It is very hard to get your foot in the door if you don't know the right people; if you don't happen to get lucky and get a more entry-level position that nobody else could fill, it is very hard to move up here. You're trying to move up—"I already know you; you're the person I'm comfortable with and I almost owe it to you, since we have this relationship, to select you for this position over somebody else that is an outsider."

Emily's perception and experiences informed her decision to broaden her job search to include other institutional types, despite her feeling more connected to community-college work as the result of her graduate-assistantship and internship experiences:

I felt like [in] a lot of community colleges, a full-time position was hard to come by. They had a lot of part-time positions, a lot of ways to get your foot in the door and learn a bit more; but as much as I was interested in community colleges, I found it hard to really see myself there, just because of the financial limitations of a part-time job, right?

Unlike Emily, Isabella was able to negotiate the financial limitations of a part-time job. Living at home with her parents after finishing her master's just as the coronavirus pandemic surged and many higher education institutions froze hiring, she viewed her part-time position with optimism: "So I would love to go to full-time; I think it's definitely a possibility where I am. I know people who did start out part-time, and now they're full-time, and it didn't take that much time." I cover these kinds of situational factors, which guided the participants' navigation of observed community-college organizational dynamics, in the following section.

Blurred departmental lines, fluid job descriptions (as discussed in the "Broad and Adaptive Roles" section), and high levels of cross-departmental collaboration were also key elements of organizational dynamics that emerged across each participant's story. Isabella provided a statement that captures the sentiments present across all five narratives: "I feel like there's teamwork [at a university], but it's within that one department. And at a community

college, the teamwork is everybody in every department, everywhere.” The participants’ stories of collaboration provide a glimpse into organizational dynamics that are centrally focused on student success, community service, and mission-driven work. This level of collaboration to serve students and adapt to their needs, noted in each narrative as a unique element of the culture, is an experience participants intertwined while they shared observations related to ambiguous and flat organizational charts.

Also related to organizational dynamics, two participants described a surprising lack of professional-development resources, and both specifically mentioned a perceived lack of training around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion compared to their graduate-preparation experience. When prompted to share what they believed to be factors in this observation, both speculated about possibilities but ultimately were not able to draw conclusions about how this observation connected to organizational characteristics or culture.

Ultimately, the perceived misalignments, contrasts, and disconnects described by the participants and observed through their transition experiences inform the characteristics that separate community-college work from the broader higher education and student-affairs contexts and culture. The agile and exceptionally broad scope of their professional roles, the impact of the local community on their institutions’ respective work, qualifiers pertaining to the uniqueness of the environment itself, and organizational dynamics to which they had to adapt all highlight moments of disconnect that prompted intentional navigation to resolve.

External Factors That Support Transition

Ematha, Hillary, Emily, Katy, and Isabella each described external forces that were influential in their transition between graduate preparation and community-college student affairs. In some cases, they turned their attention to external resources as a structure of guidance

or mentoring; in others, these factors played a situational role in defining where and how they might pursue work in community colleges.

In each story, decisions and transitions were not necessarily pursued or navigated in isolation. In this section, I detail the specific external factors that began to weave common threads throughout several, or in some cases all, of the participants' individual stories.

Situational Factors Influential to Transition

In all individual participants' experiences, situational conditions emerged as highly influential external factors in the transition to community-college work. Geographic limitations, family dynamics, and financial strains either hindered or somehow supported the participants' entry into community-college student affairs.

The influence of these external, situational factors was varied, but ever present. Ematha was the only participant of the five without previous exposure to community colleges, or for whom working in a community college had not been a consideration before she accepted her professional role. For her, situational factors such as a previous rejection from a higher education role and dissatisfaction working outside of education were leading factors in her job search. Additionally, a peer and her spouse encouraged Ematha to apply for the opportunity that ultimately led to her entry into the field. Each of these external factors combined to lead her to an opportunity that, serendipitously and without intention, launched her into community-college work.

For the other four participants, previous exposure in the form of part-time jobs, experiential learning, or graduate-school courses helped shape an internal consideration or even desire to work in a community-college setting. However, in each case, situational factors either facilitated their entry into the work or kept them from it despite their desire to enter.

For Katy, a slow, building sense of kinship with the first-generation, low-income students that community colleges, compared to other forms of higher education, disproportionately serve helped her identify the context as one aligned well with her career and personal interests. Despite this desire to work in community colleges, Katy's job search was complicated by situational factors associated with her need to simply get a job to support herself, a complex family situation—her father's medical condition, and a geographic radius that necessitated a job search that included multiple institutional types.

This general dynamic was also the case for Emily and Isabella, for whom community-college work became of personal interest or passion, but their situational factors impacted their different forms of entry into the work. Emily was unable to find a community-college position that supported her financial need for full-time employment, and thus situational factors guided her away from her desire to work in community colleges and toward a university role. From her experiences in graduate school, Emily had identified community colleges as her desired workplace, but she shared that she “found it hard to see myself there, just because of the financial limitations of a part-time job.” In contrast, Isabella's personal situation, living with her parents and able to take on part-time work, enabled her to approach her job search more broadly to include opportunities across employment status, institutional type, and functional area. Isabella said of her decision to take the part-time role in a community college: “I knew it was part-time, but I didn't mind because part-time doesn't mean it is a bad thing,” and “I do still live with my parents. I don't have the money to live on my own yet.” She also shared the feedback she received from others about making this choice:

Before anything else, it was helping students. I didn't care about the position. So people told me I was crazy. They're like, “You should look at the pay.” And I'm like, “I don't care about the pay” . . . I didn't have money to live on [my own], yes;

but I want to help students. And if I'm not doing something like that, I don't think I would be happy with what I was doing.

Hillary was guided toward community-college work through a number of situational factors, including her unexpected pregnancy just as she was beginning her graduate assistantship in Residence Life at a university. Her desire to gain student-affairs experience, in addition to her financial need, led her to part-time positions at community colleges as part of broader, more inclusive searches for opportunities regardless of institutional type. Although she loved working with community-college students during graduate school and wanted to remain at the college in which she was working part-time, she also acknowledged she might need to look for postgraduate opportunities across a variety of sectors, given her geographic limitations and proximity to family. These external factors and her perceived limited opportunities also drove her to “put the pedal to the medal” and relentlessly approach deliverables in a way that supported her ultimately earning the full-time, secure role at her institution of employment. Hillary reflected on the role of location, opportunity, and need for a permanent position in her approach:

The moment this door [vacancy in her manager's role] opened, I was like, “I have to do it because at least I've got it [an opportunity]” . . . The community college that I work for now is the closest to where I live. I definitely would have looked at the other community college that's in my town; but those jobs. . . it's very small. It's very few and far between, and it's just a branch. It's not really a community college; it's a branch. Everything else. . . there's three other 4-year institutions near where I live. There's really a lot more than that. But just in job opportunities, I was going to have to look at the 4-year.

The role of purely situational factors, often simply outside the control of the participants themselves, served either a positive or negative role in supporting participants' transition between graduate school and entry into community-college student-affairs work as a profession. However, those factors were ever-present in each experience and combined in multiple ways that impacted the respective transitions to community-college work. Family needs, financial strains,

geographic limitations, and stability in employment are all examples of the external factors whose influence cannot be understated as an emerging theme across the participant narratives.

Finding Community

For the participants, external supports, primarily in the form of peer and supervisory relationships, emerged as key factors that supported their transition between graduate school and community-college student-affairs work. Each participant shared other external supports that were individualized to them and their personal situations (such as Ematha's spouse), but three broader themes emerged across the participant's stories: peers, supervisors, and their students themselves as strong, external supports in the transition.

Katy and Emily's relationships with their supervisors had the most impact during their professional experiences; both indicated that their direct supervisor was the most influential in helping them navigate cultural differences: "acting as a really solid sounding board for us [she and her peers in the department]" (Emily), and "I know she'll [supervisor] push back if I say something that's maybe too radical" (Katy). These supervisory relationships emerged as important in guiding both Emily and Katy in adjusting to community-college student needs and assimilating into the organizational culture. This theme was also present in paraprofessional experiences during which participants were engaged in internships and graduate assistantships in community-college or regional campus environments. This was especially true in Emily's case, in which her supervisor at the regional campus where she served as a graduate assistant provided visible and concrete examples of navigating multiple stakeholders, holding exceptionally broad job responsibilities, and taking a student-centered approach to work.

In narratives in which they did not mention a direct supervisor as a strong support, the participants alternatively noted the close proximity and casual nature with which they interacted

with executive leaders who supported in a similar way. As illustrated in the previous section on organizational dynamics, this level of accessibility provided a similar level of support to Ematha and Hillary, who did not specifically mention their supervisors; but for whom these leadership relationships supported their transition by serving as an additional external support.

The role of peers emerged as another strong theme of external support in the culture. This theme was present in each of the five participants' narratives, and especially salient in Hillary and Ematha's experiences of transition. Hillary, when faced with misalignments between her graduate preparation and the community-college culture, specifically related to applying student-development theory and the value of graduate preparation within community-college student affairs; she found solidarity among a minority of coworkers with formal training in student affairs. For Ematha, a fellow unit leader at the same organizational level helped her overcome her initial surprise about small department budgets, strategic planning, and a student-centered service model. These peer supports were also key to Isabella as she was learning the vast and broad content relative to her enrollment-specialist role; to Katy, who needed to quickly form relationships to build a network of services to support her students; and to Emily, who was hired simultaneously with several others to jointly construct a community college's orientation programs. For each, the experiences and successful transitions of those who were at the institutions before them served an invaluable function as external sources for knowledge, student-service collaboration, and for understanding how to adjust approaches to meet the broad and unique needs of the student population. They described relationships with peers in the institutions themselves using phrasing such as "family" (Ematha); "best interest at heart" (Katy); "got your back, you've got mine" (Katy); "a lot of support" (Emily); "patient and willing to redirect" (Emily); "at middle-management level, we just work better as a team" (Hillary); "really

close coworker” (Hillary, Ematha); “focused” (Isabella); and “welcoming, friendly, very open to new things” (Isabella).

The perceived impact of the participants work on students and communities has been noted in a previous section, during which the emergent theme of “doing work that matters” was described. Similarly, and surprisingly, students themselves were an external source from which each of the participants drew support in their transition. Katy, completing her portrayal of the effort she put in during exceptionally busy days, described the support she derived from students: “They will pay me back tenfold.” Forms of this sentiment about the impact participants perceived they had and the energy they drew from students, was present in each of the narratives. Even though community-college students may not realize they are intentionally providing energy to the staff with whom they work, that reality was just as emergent as their supervisors and peers as among the most influential external factors in participants’ transition to student-affairs work.

These three individual elements of the culture—students, supervisors and peers—combined to set forth one of the most important external factors in support of participants’ transition: a sense of community within the culture itself. The sense of support derived from these external factors helped buoy the participants when they were navigating cultural misalignments, and it ultimately aided in their resolution of these differences. In addition, the external supports these individuals and informed networks provided helped build a community of practice for the participants to feel as though they were part of the community-college culture overall (as all participants confirmed during their narratives).

Internal Factors That Support Transition

Just as external factors wove throughout each participant’s story, their internal thought processes, personal lenses, and individual characteristics also emerged as important and rich

factors in the five participants' described transition stories. The interviews during which their stories and narrative data were collected were highly personalized and opened a glimpse into their lives as people inside and outside of the two cultures at the center of discussion.

Ematha, Hillary, Katy, Emily, and Isabella approached misalignments and opportunities in highly individualized ways, illustrating their personalities and describing how their internal methods of processing new information or navigating challenges transferred into the specific transition we discussed (graduate school and community-college student affairs). In this section I outline the shared perspectives that emerged in unique, yet similar, ways in each of their stories.

Graduate Preparation As a Frame for Meaning Making

Whether participants had entered a professional role immediately following graduation or after a first role in a different type of institution, lessons, exposure, and experiences from graduate school provided a frame of reference from which the participants developed strategies to navigate community-college culture. Graduate preparation emerged as one of the most salient factors informing personal strategies (internal factor) during transition. While some experiences directly informed the participants' actions and strategies in transition, others provided a contrast that allowed the participants to make comparisons and reconcile misalignments. Preparation derived from their programs served as the vehicle that undergirded many of the factors that supported their transition.

For Katy and Emily, who completed the same preparation program, this connection between graduate-school experiences and their navigation of community colleges was more direct. Both described their graduate program as highly inclusive of content and experiences that illustrated the differences across institutional types within higher education. Several times during her interview, Katy referenced a book referenced in earlier chapters of this study, *Where You*

Work Matters (Hirt, 2006), as one of the most impactful supports in her transition to community-college student affairs. Katy's graduate program placed intentional effort on illustrating differences between types of institutions, offering graduate assistantships in a wide range of regional institutions and an optional, focused certificate in topics such as community-college administration, research, and other functional areas. She described reading Hirt (2006), and also her perspective of a community-college internship as

[giving] me the foundational knowledge that I've still found really helpful; and it helps me put words to feelings and ideas that I still have at times about the work I do [at the community college], like thinking about rewards and the challenges and putting words to those.

Emily described the same program as integral to developing in her an aptitude and interest in one day working in a community college. When she had the opportunity to do so in a full-time capacity, she described the diversity of her graduate program and her assistantship at a regional campus as providing a frame of reference: "We [in class] talked about how community colleges have to be more responsive to their community because they are often this bridge between the community needs and what skills and certifications are needed to get there." She described seeing community needs manifest into fast-paced responses firsthand in her graduate assistantship, and also in her first professional role at a community college. Because of this, Emily knew ahead of time that "you had to be more on your feet and flexible in a community college," a principle that she later applied as a strategy to help her perform with agility and responsiveness when designing orientation programs in a fast-paced, ever-changing, urban community college.

As Katy and Emily described their graduate preparation as formal and drew specific links between their work in community colleges and the content that prepared them for it, other participants used graduate-school experiences as frames for meaning making and transition. For

Ematha, working in a community college made clear to her what student affairs “is,” even as she left with an undefined and ambiguous understanding of how the functional areas worked together, given how spread out they were in the university context of her graduate program. According to Ematha, her teaching experience in graduate school also provided a clear frame of reference to compare and contrast the strong institutional culture of “love” and “care” she found at her community college. This frame prompted self-reflection and also helped her strategize differently about how to reshape her interactions with students.

For Isabella and Hillary, concurrently experiencing graduate school and part-time work and internships at community colleges provided a unique perspective on their graduate-program content. Isabella described her program as one that did not deeply cover institutional type, but she did have an opportunity to take an elective course on community colleges that she said was beneficial because she “liked having the differences pointed out. Some of them are not huge differences, but they’re enough to make a difference when you are working.” Specifically, Isabella found this experience to be helpful in understanding the population with whom she now worked, community-college organizational dynamics, and also in navigating the “lack of compartmentalization” with which she had to grapple to perform effectively in her broad enrollment-services role. Isabella also described her program’s classes as “focused on 4-year institutions rather than community colleges,” but she shared that “when they did talk about community colleges, it aligned pretty well [to her internship experience].”

Of all of the participants, Hillary most explicitly described her self-awareness in the misalignment between her graduate preparation and current community-college work. However, like Ematha, even her disconnected experiences had provided her with a frame of reference from which she had identified gaps in her own preparation, made meaning of her environment, and

informed her personal community-college student-service philosophy. Often examining her “self” domain, Hillary described herself as “underprepared” to work with adult learners, and she expressed frustration in that she was able to go through a graduate program without having her personal bias against community-college students challenged. Intrinsically motivated to do so, she began testing student-development theories, diversity practices, and engagement practices she had learned about in graduate school; and, through trial and error, she recalibrated her approaches in a way that balanced her professional training, personal values, and student needs in the community-college environment. Uniquely, Hillary also described her graduate-school preparation in student affairs as a factor in the development of a support system and community of practice at work, where she and others had observed that those with preparation for professional student-affairs work were in the minority.

Doing Work That Matters

Another emerging theme related to internal factors surfaced across all participants’ stories: a desire to help and a personal goal to engage in work they perceived as “mattering.” Of course, student affairs is, in and of itself, a helping profession that involves aiding in the development of others. However, specifically considered as a personal factor that supports individuals’ transition between two cultures, the prevalence of this theme in the five participants’ stories demonstrates the power of personal commitment and purpose as cornerstones in the participants’ lived experiences and negotiation when they were faced with transitional challenges.

Ematha, who encountered community-college culture with little exposure to it previous to her first professional role, centered on her desire to help people as one of the early factors in her immediate connection to the work. She discussed the symbolism and messages that set the tone

for how those in her community-college environment were to engage with students, and the cultural norms associated with “loving” and “caring” for them. She described approaching everything she did “with the heart of a teacher” and overcame her personal bias related to community colleges when she saw the challenges her students faced and the impact the college had on their lives. Nearing the end of her interview, she shared, “It is so enriching for your soul to help those students and just love on them and help them. And then, when they get the job they wanted, it’s like, ‘Yes! They’re moving out of poverty.’”

Like Ematha, Hillary also addressed her previously held bias related to students who attend community colleges, and she quickly began to “respect that [attending a community college] a lot,” realizing “how important community colleges are to some people who did not have the access and privilege I did.” A self-described social-justice advocate, she believed her work in this culture “matters on a student level,” and she described the culture as “it [community-college work] gives you the opportunity to change lives more than the 4-year does.” In the moments in which Hillary had adapted or adjusted, she described her motivation as being “student centered” or “adjusting, because the students are very different in different places.” Like Ematha, her self-described desire to help others had been a factor in her quickly adapting to a culture she experienced as centered on meeting student needs.

Describing her realization that a role at a university one-stop center did not ignite her passion as much as the open-access environment she had experienced in grad school, Emily yearned for work in which she could see impact: “I didn’t feel like I was helping students that necessarily needed it as much as some of the students at community colleges.” She commented about the job posting that led her back to community-college culture after 6 months working at

the university: “It felt like I would get to do something that mattered, which has always been really important to me.”

Emily’s story, informed by her own personal challenges as a college student, led her to want to make a difference in work that mattered. When describing whether or not she felt as though she was part of the community-college subculture, Emily explained: “I feel like it is who I am to try to always go above and beyond, particularly for students,” and “I feel like, particularly at a community college, you can really see the impact you are personally having on students, with students.”

This sentiment and alignment with personal values and a belief in student-centered student-affairs work was also a theme often discussed throughout Katy and Isabella’s stories. Katy, a low-income, first-generation college student, was drawn to community-college work because of her own personal experiences with homelessness, financial strain, dropping out of college after her first few years, and family instability. Her personal experiences showed her that not everyone experiences colleges the way it is presented, and that high levels of individualization are needed to identify and address the needs of students who have life experiences that contribute to the risk of falling through the cracks. On multiple occasions throughout her interview, Katy referenced the book, *Where You Work Matters*, used in her graduate training that illustrated different institutional types and that “put into words what I valued, the challenges I was willing to overcome, and nailing down what culture I was drawn to about certain schools and not others.” Of the challenges she met in her busy and chaotic role, she explained:

I think the rewards are still worth the challenges to me; I get to work with students that I really enjoy. I really enjoy helping people who are up against some really difficult obstacles become successful and reach their goals and figure out what they

want to do in life . . . that ends up being why I go to work every day. The student population we work with make the job worth it.”

Isabella, still within her first year of transition to a professional role in community-college student affairs, had already identified the opportunities to align her values with her work. She compared the work she did to other higher education settings: “But in community college [by comparison], their [students] are like, “I am a person here. They [the staff] know my name. They’d always really take the time to ask. The level of connection and ability to help others was central to her personal connection to her work.

Across all five participants, this internal commitment to doing important work, helping others, improving society, or seeking the culture in which they could make the most difference showed up as an important antidote to any challenges they encountered while moving between cultures and through the transition.

Each of the five participants demonstrated self-awareness and internal reflection when describing their respective transitions, supported largely by their graduate program’s emphasis (or lack thereof) on differences across institutional type, along with an internal drive to engage in work they perceived as having value. These two factors, specifically, provided strong intrinsic guidance and hunches from which they could make meaning of the cultural elements they encountered when they were working as a student-affairs professional in a community college.

In Review

The five participants’ stories serve as the cornerstone for this study, bringing to life the unique situations, supports, and insights of individuals who completed graduate degrees in preparation for entry into student-affairs work and found themselves working in community-college environments. Highly individualized in nature, these experiences are important to understanding how internal and external factors combine in unique ways to support individuals

in such transition, and also the disconnects community-college student-affairs professionals encounter when transitioning between the two cultures at the center of this inquiry.

Despite the diverse factors and experiences associated with each participant in this narrative inquiry, eight specific emergent themes rose to the surface and serve to inform the questions that guide this study. Graduate preparation and community-college student affairs, as two separate but related cultures, can be more deeply understood by the participants' descriptions of four key themes: *broad and adaptive roles, localization, colloquial use of the phrase "especially in community colleges," and organizational dynamics*. The factors supporting the participants in their transition between these two separate, but related, cultures can be understood as two distinct sets of emergent themes: The participants' most salient internal factors that support their transition include *doing work that matters* and *applying graduate school as a frame for meaning making*; two prominent external themes are *situational considerations* and *sense of community*. These emergent themes serve as the study's findings and provide a foundation for further exploration in Chapter 5 of their connection to literature and implications for practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The five participant stories collected and analyzed during this study illuminate individual, real-world examples and lived experiences of those with formal preparation for student-affairs or higher education leadership work within the 4-year/university setting who then transitioned into professional roles at five different community colleges. I designed the study to further explore the stated research problem, during which the literature review revealed community colleges as unique contexts in which student-affairs professionals work, and that foundational elements of graduate preparation for this work may create a unique transitional experience for those who enter it. I gathered the participant stories to address three research questions:

- (a) How do individuals experience the transition between graduate-school preparation programs and community-college student-affairs work as two separate, but related, cultures?
- (b) What external factors facilitate new student-affairs professionals' transition from graduate school into community-college work? and
- (c) What internal or personal factors support this transition between graduate school and community-college work?

Connected to the study's constructivist approach and use of narrative inquiry, the five participant stories are not generalizable to all individuals with experience moving between graduate programs and community-college work. Rather, findings from these stories, compared and contrasted with earlier literature, provide clues that generate future research questions, suggest possible changes to shape graduate preparation, encourage community colleges to further

engage with the broader landscape of higher education, and deepen scholarly dialogue generated from previous studies, as covered earlier in the literature review.

For this study, understanding the transition experience of professionals from their preparation program to the community-college context was shaped by the literature and research that preceded the study. As suggested by the literature, community colleges are a unique landscape in higher education overall (Askin, 2007; Ayers, 2017; Desai, 2012; Gulley, 2018; Heelan & Mellow, 2017; Hirt, 2006, Palomba & Banta, 1999), and those who work in community colleges have developed their own networks, ways of working, language, and resources that differentiate that work according to institutional type (Helfgot, 2005; Hirt, 2006). These differences informed the classification of community colleges as *subculture* (Sebald, 1975), and provided the theoretical framework within which to present the first research question: How do individuals experience graduate-school preparation and community-college student-affairs work as two separate, but related, cultures? Four of my findings address this research question, illustrating graduate preparation and community-college student-affairs work as separate, but related, cultures through the narrative data collected: (a) broad and adaptive roles within community-college student affairs, (b) localization, (c) use of the phrase “especially at community colleges”, and (d) organizational structure and dynamics.

Viewing the shift between these two defined cultures as a transition, I designed the second and third research questions to explore what specific factors supported individuals’ experience of separate but related cultures. As a framework for understanding highly individualized transitions, I drew upon Schlossberg’s (2011) 4S model to provide a lens through which to identify the external and internal factors presented in the participants’ stories, classify those factors in accordance with the model, and align them to address these two additional

research questions. More specifically, with the second research question I sought to identify the specific external or environmental factors that support the transition between graduate school and community-college student-affairs work, and these factors are evident through two of my key findings: (a) situational factors, and (b) the process of finding community. I designed the third research question to guide inquiry into the internal and personal factors that support the same transition, and these factors are addressed through two key findings: (a) doing work that matters, and (b) using the graduate school as a frame for meaning making. In the following sections, I address the alignment and contrasts between the review of relevant studies in Chapter 2 and the findings from this current study, which begin to reveal implications for future practice within graduate-school preparation, community colleges, and more broadly, higher education.

Comparing Current Findings and Previous Literature

Ematha, Hillary, Emily, Katy, and Isabella brought to life several topics from previous studies and literature through their anecdotes and meaning-making processes. In contrast, findings from this study in some cases contradict previous findings and also provide additional areas for expanded research. As evidenced by the emerging themes outlined in the previous chapter, the participants' five stories overlapped in ways that pushed several differences between the cultures to the surface, and now provide a new lens through which we can view previous studies and literature. In the following sections I provide an integrated analysis of the study's findings as they relate to earlier research presented in the literature review.

Experiencing Separate but Related Cultures

To fully understand how individuals experience the transition between graduate preparation programs and entry into community-college student affairs, participant perspective on the relationship between these contexts was of particular interest in the interview process. In

each conversation with participants, we both explicitly and implicitly touched upon culture, subculture, and how these concepts manifested and intertwined throughout the participants' lived experiences of transition. The presence of multiple missions, localization, social justice, and challenges in measuring outcomes were specific elements participants explored as culturally different within community colleges in the context of a review of previous findings. These four specific findings from the current study address the first research question and describe these cultural differences as participants directly experienced them.

Revisiting the original definition in the literature used to frame this inquiry, *subculture* is a term used to refer to a set of social norms and structures that a subset of a larger culture may define or adopt as the result of differences in experience between themselves and the broader mainstream, or dominant, culture (Sebald, 1975). With only one exception, the participants of this study affirmed that community college is a subculture of the broader American higher education system, defined by four distinct findings that reflect the uniqueness of community-college culture. Only one exception to this perspective was provided, and the participant offered an alternative term: *coculture*, which she preferred because it challenged the assumption that community colleges exist as *sub* (beneath) other institutional types.

Earlier literature I reviewed highlights unique elements associated with America's community colleges relative to the 4-year university counterparts whose issues, research, and topics dominate higher education discourse (Crisp et al., 2016; Floyd et al., 2016; Townsend et al., 2005). Previous literature also illustrates community colleges as substantially different from other institutional types in terms of mission (Askin, 2007; Ayers, 2017; Barringer & Jaquette, 2018; Desai, 2012; 2018; Hirt, 2006) and approaches to student affairs (Hirt, 2006; Tull et al.,

2015). These differences, as noted in earlier studies and literature, provide a foundation for reflection on the findings from this current study.

Experiencing Broad, Adaptive Student-Affairs Roles

Each participant in my study described experiences working with students and institutional initiatives that span across the three categories of the community-college mission as defined by Desai (2012): transfer, workforce development, and developmental education. In a review of student-affairs functions across different institutional types, Hirt (2006) described community-college professionals as the “producers” (p. 137), a nod to their expansive areas of responsibility, responsiveness to student needs, and the critical thinking they must display to adapt their services and work to the multiple missions and stakeholders connected to their institutions. This level of production and action-oriented work is also largely due to the fact that America’s community colleges serve such a unique student body that reflects our nation’s rich diversity across race, socioeconomic status, gender, employment, and family structure in ways that other forms of higher education may not (AACC, 2020; Shapiro et al., 2017). To support student access and success within such a context requires sophisticated student-service approaches, systems, units, and teams that can bend toward rapidly changing needs across multiple student experiences (Baston, 2018). By uncovering *broad and adaptive roles* as one of the key findings and cultural elements identified in this study, the participants’ lived experiences align to previous findings. In addition, this key finding provides real-life examples of both the diversity and breadth of the student populations served by the five individuals working in community-college student affairs, and the agility with which their work must be approached to fulfill expectations across multiple missions.

The participants' direct accounts of their broad and adaptive roles support the concepts and themes from previous literature, reinforcing community-college student-affairs work as fast paced, changing, and broad in scope. In reference to qualitative data collection, Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) described the level of listening and engagement required to facilitate narrative inquiry as "exhausting" (p. 32), and this was certainly my understanding of their experiences as each of the five participants described their vast and bustling roles, daily experiences, and the manner in which their institutions functioned. The participants' descriptions of not only their daily work, but also their extended job descriptions, blurred lines between functional areas, quick thinking, and "code switching" to address individual student needs illustrate an environment they experienced as culturally unique.

We can understand part of their experiences working with students by comparing them with a previous study on student mobility and transfer, which illustrates the complexity of movement within the larger higher education macrosystem (Baldwin, 2017). Baldwin (2017) described student movement between systems in higher education as nonlinear, misaligned, and at times disjointed in terms of academic advising and pathways. The current study supports this finding as well, as the participants attributed the adaptive nature of their work to the various needs their students sought to fulfill by attending the community college. From transfer planning to workforce connection, the student situations described by participants in this study demonstrated the complexity of student mobility patterns between systems as students stop out, resume, start at one institution to complete at another, delay college entry, and make decisions that challenge student-affairs professionals to guide their academic and career planning. The adaptability and breadth of knowledge described by participants as necessary to meet their students' needs demonstrates the complexity of student movement between systems, consistent

with Baldwin's (2017) findings related to student mobility and "swirl" within the higher education ecosystem.

Broad and adaptive roles such as the participants experienced present a unique cultural element of community colleges and is one of the findings from this study. The functions and manner in which the participants carried out their broad and adaptive roles, however, can also be compared to previous literature that defines student affairs as a profession. For example, Helfgot (2005) described student affairs as important because

being in college is about developing an identity, a sense of purpose, and a sense of self; it is [also] about developing the soft skills employers find increasingly important: interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and the ability to work as a team. (Helfgot, 2005, p. 9)

The field has also been described as supporting student development within a college setting (Hirt, 2006). However, in describing the adaptability and broad nature of their roles, especially regarding the frequency with which they needed to pivot or "code switch" to work with such diverse students, participants noted that these factors often placed concepts and theories they had learned in training on the periphery and unimportant in the moment. More specifically, two participants noted the need to adjust their style to be more transactional, direct, and concrete. For these two participants, the shift in their approach to working with students was largely prompted by the number of adult learners with whom they were working, and also those who might be juggling multiple roles, raising children while attending school, or connecting with the community college during a brief lunch break or other rushed interaction. Said one participant of her students: "They [community-college students with whom she works] want correct information. They want you to help them"; and another participant described her interactions with students as "you have student-development theory in your head, and the student [is like] 'I am on my lunch break and I have 5 minutes. I've got to go.'"

Although one of the findings I discuss later in this chapter is the deep sense of meaning and impact the participants felt from their work, their interactions with students were also more grounded in knowledge transfer and rapid, acute problem-solving when compared with the developmental or explorative descriptions of student-affairs work I found in previous literature. When compared to the lived experiences of the five community-college student-affairs professionals, the manner in which student affairs as a profession is often understood and defined, along with its role within institutions, reveals some disconnect between the developmental nature of the profession versus how the participants' carried out their daily work. Although core characteristics of the profession (Helfgot, 2005; Hirt, 2006) are centered on student development, findings from this study suggest that professionals working in community colleges may not experience these tenets of the profession to the extent they are described. Rather, the study participants' experiences with acute problem-solving and agility in triaging student issues is more aligned with two of the three functional subcategories of the profession as described by Nevarez and Wood (2010): technical (supporting enrollment and registration) and nexus (supporting academic experiences and functions). While the third functional subcategory from Nevarez and Wood's (2010) definitions, *campus life*, was an element of the participants' broad and adaptive roles, efforts to engage students or carry out campus-life functions was relatively limited. Katy alluded to this in her narrative, sharing the very small windows of opportunity she had to connect with or engage with a student or group of students while they were on campus in between classes, work, and family responsibilities.

Overall, the participants' willingness to change to better serve students, streamline the services they provided, and uphold the mission of their institutions aligned well with a previous description of community-college student-affairs work: "They take pride in their ability to adapt

quickly to changing circumstances; it is a mark of their professionalism” (Hirt, 2006, p. 149).

While shaped by and rooted in the student-affairs profession and overall support of students in a higher education environment, participants’ lived experiences with the breadth and adaptability of their roles provides a glimpse into a setting that diverges slightly from the foundations of the student-affairs profession.

Experiencing Localization As a Unique Cultural Element

Economic changes, workforce needs, and public attitudes toward education were all identified in the literature as influencing factors related to the work output and organizational focus of community colleges as organizations (Ayers, 2017). Often buoyed by local tax contributions and community stakeholders involved in their governance, community colleges naturally build their work around the local needs and allocate resources toward those issues, services, and opportunities most critical or desired by local stakeholders (Askin, 2007). Hirt (2016) described the far-reaching connection between the community college and its local community: “Every person or organization in the service area is a potential client of the community college” (p. 136). This local influence on organizational focus and mission naturally impacts the work of student-affairs professionals as individuals and units existing within the institutional culture (Hirt, 2006).

Aligned with the literature presented previously, the participants in my study described the significant role local stakeholders played in their ability to successfully lead work at their institutions. This tight connection to outside stakeholder influences is present not only in the institutions’ local collaborations and connections but also is one of the factors that generates the adaptive and busy working conditions for the broad and adaptive roles described in the previous section. The participants’ experiences of external influences on their work are connected to what

Hirt (2006) described: “In addition to [changes] happening quickly, the majority of change for student-affairs professionals at a community college are externally induced” (p. 150). This statement supports some of the unique experiences the participants shared, such as pivoting quickly to launch a program pitched by a local employer or school, or responding to a downturn in the local economy by assisting displaced workers with navigating the parameters of their retraining funds.

Four of the participants directly shared stories about the role of at least one local stakeholder as an influencer of institutional culture. Consideration of local employers and their needs, relationships with local school districts, an understanding of local families’ perspectives on education, and the overall impact of college completion on the local economy were all present within the participants’ experiences as they made meaning of and learned their roles as community-college student-affairs professionals. One participant also shared that local organizations and nonprofits were a source of resources she had learned to access as a method to counter the lower departmental budgets she encountered while working in a community-college environment. For that participant, the local community served as an important source of support and partner in carrying out the mission of the college, thus affirming the mutual reliance between the college and community it serves as part of the implied social contract (Heelan & Mellow, 2017).

In addition, two participants identified a gap in their training and knowledge related to workforce development, but they found this to be a strong local factor in driving the institution’s offerings and services. This particular gap they identified is also consistent with one of the findings from Floyd et al. (2016) review of community-college journals, in which the term

workforce development was identified as one of several terms uniquely found within the language of higher education literature specifically focused on the community-college sector.

This finding, the role of localization as a factor in community-college work as a separate but unique culture, also reinforces the critique and discussion in Chapter 2 of Rojas's (2015) observation of "decoupling between academic movements and their non-academic allies" (p. 272). Although this decoupling may be true in some forms of academia, both the literature and the lived experiences of the participants in my study demonstrate coupling between social movements and community colleges as a form of academia. To be sure, community colleges are highly localized in their focus; however, the extent to which workforce development, partnerships with local organizations, joint work with school districts, and eradication of local poverty showed up in the participants' stories demonstrates interconnectedness between the domains Rojas (2015) described.

"Especially at Community Colleges": A Cultural Boundary

In addressing the challenges of defining *culture* and *subculture* in relationship to organizational knowledge and shared experience, the boundaries that separate one set of norms from another can be difficult to identify and define (Dowd & Dowd, 2003). Historically, Sackman (1992) responded to this challenge by describing these boundaries as a "cognitive culture map, serving as the basis for drawing a group together in shared perspective" (p. 142). Although not directly apparent in the literature, the participants' use of a specific qualifier in their interviews ("especially in community colleges") provides subtle evidence of a shared perspective.

I identified the shared use of this specific phrase as a finding in my study because it implies community-college culture is somehow separate or unique relative to other forms of

higher education. *Especially*, as a defined term, is a word “used to single out one person, thing, or situation over all others” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). The qualifying term, in and of itself, authenticates the presence of a shared understanding (between participants) of community colleges as “other,” or as a special classification that warrants a unique action or approach. And although ambiguous in nature and used differently by the participants, the phrase *especially at community colleges* supports Sackman’s (1992) notion of culture as difficult to fully describe or place boundaries around, yet evidenced by shared perspectives, references, and ways of working found within a group of individuals. In addition, this qualifying phrase as a finding in my study is also aligned to previous findings related to student-affairs practice in community colleges as fundamentally unique relative to other institutional types (Hirt, 2006; Tull et al., 2015).

Experiencing Unique Organizational Structure and Dynamics

Previous literature has described community colleges as highly mission-driven, collaborative work environments that require teams to work across functional areas and organizational boundaries to meet the needs of their students and communities (Gulley, 2018; Hirt, 2006; Tull et al., 2015). These collaborative approaches are a reflection of the organizations’ ability to adapt and bend to accommodate changing local needs, but they also can lead to organizational structures that are not easily understood. For example, in interviewing community-college academic and student-affairs teams, Gulley (2018) found high levels of teamwork across organizational units and lower prevalence of power dynamics within the culture. An organizational structure that encouraged collaboration and little to no power dynamics was described by participants in my study, as well. Each participant described work experiences that were highly collaborative; involved multiple departments to resolve a single student concern; and close working relationships with their peers, supervisors, and even

executive-level administration. Participants in this study also noted the flat organizational structure. This unique structure was also reflected through participants' description of experiences with limited career ladders and lack of full-time opportunities in which to begin their community-college student-affairs careers. The experiences they described as culturally unique are consistent with Gulley's (2018) description of community colleges as environments rich with collaboration, a focus on work output as opposed to power dynamics, and a practice of joint problem-solving.

However, the participants' lived experiences with organizational structures as a unique factor do diverge compared to previous literature. Two participants from my study broached the topic of their organization's lack of professional development specifically related to issues of diversity. This characteristic Heelan is curious because community colleges serve such diverse populations and provide a gateway to higher education for many who have been historically underserved by higher education (Heelan & Mellow, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2017). For example, Aragon and Brantmeier (2009) urged community colleges to prioritize diversity as a critical consideration in their work to "foster a reconciliation process towards social justice [to overcome the legacy of past power differentials]" (p. 40). In contrast, only two participants in my study described professional development in this area, but they also noted the low levels of engagement, infrequent dialogue about diversity issues, small number of opportunities offered, and their overall surprise at the lack of focus on diversity issues, given what they had experienced in their graduate studies and what they thought to be true about diversity as a relevant topic in student-affairs work. The other participants did not mention diversity training, dialogue, or awareness at all. Even though participants described their environments as highly diverse in terms of life experiences, age, and socioeconomic status, only one participant

mentioned race or other forms of diversity as present in organizational dialogue. This reality is also in contrast to diversity, equity, and inclusion as priorities within major organizations such as Achieving the Dream and the American Association of Community Colleges, which support community-college reforms.

Also embedded within the broader finding of organizational structure and dynamics are several participants' observations regarding hiring practices and educational attainment levels within the community colleges in which they were working. Overall, the participants described organizational dynamics that included perceived high rates of internal promotion, a lack of priority on credentials for leadership positions, flat structures that did not support room for advancement, and noticeable prevalence of part-time roles related to student services. Their experiences with hiring and career pipelines as it relates to organizational dynamics were consistent with several earlier pieces of literature that noted the less traditional pathways that lead individuals to community-college student affairs. One of the participants described tension in her workplace because of distinctions between those who had experienced graduate-level preparation for work in student affairs and those who had not but had risen through the ranks of the institution through output and performance. Kisker (2005) previously described a phenomenon similar to this:

There is a vast diversity of educational backgrounds among community college student affairs staff. Some have been trained as counselor, but graduate programs in counseling do not always focus primarily on institutions of higher education, much less community colleges with their unique missions, challenges, and expectations. In addition, many entry-level community college student affairs positions do not require a master's degree; community colleges frequently hire bright, young college graduates who, despite their enthusiasm and willingness to learn, have had little exposure to the core values and theories that drive the profession. (p. 89)

This ambiguous pathway to entering community-college student-affairs work is what several of the participants in my study encountered directly as job seekers but also noticed within

the culture itself. A disconnect existed between educational background and the roles individuals held, or previous training they had completed. This observation was also coupled with their descriptions of limited opportunities and perceived high rates of internal hiring, experiences which are also supported by previous literature focused on the unique aspects of community colleges: “Student affairs professionals at community colleges often access an entry-level position through different avenues, including working their way from part-time or clerical positions to a full-time professional role within a specific student affairs unit” (Dalpes et al., 2015, p. 283).

For the participants in my study, advancement early in their careers as student-affairs professionals was not necessarily a salient theme, despite their observations of unusual organizational culture and dynamics. This fact was partially due to the participants’ satisfaction in their current roles; but reference to the lack of a career ladder was subtly woven into two of the participants’ narratives. Their perception of advancement opportunities also aligns to findings from an earlier study, in that advancement pathways were ambiguous among new and mid-level community-college professionals, and that the ever-changing nature of the community college led to a less stable structure that was often reinvented and reorganized rather than made hierarchical (Hornak et al., 2016, p. 124). Only one of the participants expressed an interest in a higher leadership position; but she also accepted that her current role as a director was fulfilling for the foreseeable future, and that a Dean of Students role would be the only more advanced role she might pursue, given its focus on student advocacy.

In comparing and contrasting the study’s findings with previous literature, it is also important to consider the changing nature of community colleges as organizations. Dowd and Dowd (2003) explained the phenomenon: “Over time [however], the cultural power of the wider

society reels groups at varying locations on the cultural periphery in toward the center—that is, to assimilate them” (p. 34). As community colleges—still relatively young in their inception and evolution compared to the dominant, 4-year, higher education institutions—grow and become more sophisticated in their student-success work, it is likely that their organizational structures will continue to mature and build structural hierarchies (Kuk, 2015). This current study, in particular, focused on the participants’ lived experiences with organizational structure, dynamics, and culture, but specifically within their first 3 years in the profession, based on the timeframe of adjustment related to socialization theory (Cooman et al., 2009). Although these initial experiences led to a finding regarding cultural differences between the participants’ understanding of organizational structure with graduate-school preparation and community-college culture, this finding is one that warrants additional exploration. As both the participants advance in their careers and community colleges themselves mature as organizations, their experiences with this cultural misalignment may continue to evolve, as well.

External Factors That Support Transition: Situation and Support

Schlossberg (1981) described external supports as resources from which an individual can pull strength or motivation during a transition. Anderson et al. (2012) expanded on this notion, describing the external domains, such as timing, structural barriers, and the level of influence the individual can exert (situation), and the individuals and organizations that function to “affect, affirm, or aid” (p. 85) during a transition (supports), as those outside of the individual’s control. Two specific findings from my current study address the second research question, offering insight into the external factors that supported their movement between graduate school and professional work in community-college student affairs.

Situations: The Impact of Timing, Chance, and Other External Factors

An earlier study by Taub and McEwen (2006) explored the factors that influenced 300 individuals' decisions to go into the field of student affairs, though without specific reference to institutional type. Of the participants in Taub and McEwen's (2006) study, 72.7% reported they were attracted to the field of student affairs because of the likelihood of engaging in meaningful work, and more than half of the participants (53%) in their study were introduced to the field itself during the latter part of their undergraduate experience. Although the participants in my study shared similar sentiments about their work in student affairs overall, and all of them were connected to student affairs as a profession during their undergraduate experiences, the goals they had established for themselves before they began graduate school did not play out as expected. Situational factors, also referred to as "what is happening at the time of transition" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 61), created disruptions and tensions with the original plans they had, both at entry into their graduate program and also at critical points throughout both their graduate preparation and job-search experiences. None of the participants had explicitly considered pursuing community-college student-affairs work as part of their decision to enter graduate-preparation, though Katy had lightly entertained it based on what she thought might be a personal kinship with the low-income, first-generation college students she suspected the institutional type served. However, she shared during her interview that she did not necessarily "have the words for what she felt" until she explored functional areas and institutional types in her graduate program. Three other participants shared that community-college work became an appealing and viable career option at different points after they had entered graduate preparation or as a result of a part-time job, graduate assistantship, or internship. However, situational factors related to family dynamics, pregnancy, partner relationships, finances, or geographic location all

became the primary factors in their job searches. These primary situational factors either supported or deterred the participants' transition into community-college student affairs, leading them to either take roles at community colleges by happenstance, or stood in the way of their desire to enter the culture after they completed their master's degrees. Situational factors, such as urgency for financial stability after graduate school, led Katy and Emily away from community-college roles initially, despite the affinity they had developed for the work during graduate school. However, situational factors (family illness, unhappiness in a role) also drew them both back to the culture after short stints in the roles they had initially accepted after graduate school. By contrast, Ematha had not been exposed to community-college work previously, but her geographic location led her to apply, accept, and enter professional work in the culture. Hillary, while concurrently working part time within the culture while she was in graduate school, felt strong motivation to secure full-time employment at the community college, given the geographic limitations of her area. Isabella was also somewhat limited geographically, but her situation involved the opportunity to remain at home living with her family, thus lessening the financial strain associated with part-time work (which initially had led Katy and Emily away from entering the culture). This strong presence and influence of situational factors in the transition was also present in another qualitative study focused on new and mid-level student-affairs professionals in community colleges. Hormak et al. (2016) shared the following observation: "A common description of career choices and socialization was that they 'fell into it,' 'wanted to stay in the region' or at that institution, or 'hadn't expected to be at a community college, but it ended up that way.'" (Hornak et al., 2016, p. 124). Like the literature suggests, four of the participants each grappled with situational factors as an added complexity in their job searches, in which these considerations at times eclipsed any strong pull they had developed

toward community-college work while they were in graduate school. Despite their graduate experiences, the primary focus for each participant following graduation was simply “finding a job” that coincided with their individual situations.

Even as the affinity of participants in my study grew for community-college work at various points in their graduate-school preparation and transition, their original career intent when they entered graduate school was consistent with findings from a previous study: Liddell et al. (2014, p. 62) found that student-affairs professionals are attracted to the functional area and institutional types they have personally experienced. Both situational factors and exposure to community-college work during graduate school challenged current participants’ original plans to work in environments (such as universities, housing and residence-life experience, and orientation programming) in which they had first been exposed to student affairs as undergraduate students. Even so, their lived experiences do support the findings from Liddell et al. (2014) about common pathways into the field. One example is Hillary, who initially wanted to pursue work in student affairs as a residence-life professional at a university, but her pregnancy (situational) led her to part-time work at a community college. In fact, the opening quote on Hillary’s transcription, when prompted by a general question about her pathway to student affairs, was “I became a resident assistant; I feel like this is how everybody's story starts,” which certainly aligns with Lidell et al.’s (2014) description of housing and residence life as a “major pipeline into the profession” (p. 82). Another example is Isabella’s initial career plans, which included obtaining her master’s degree to be able to work at her undergraduate institution (a commuter 4-year university) in the offices with which she had interacted as a student. For Isabella, an internship at a community college (situational factor) helped broaden her interests within the field, which in turn encouraged her to look beyond her initial plans. As

one of the findings in my study, situational considerations appear to be exceptionally salient factors in student-affairs professionals' job searches, and may even override individuals' desires to enter certain functional areas or institutional types.

Supports: Finding Community

Across five participants, relationships reflected examples of external supports. When Schlossberg (1981) was initially developing the early iteration of the 4S model, *supports* were included and referred to factors in an individual's life that helped build community and foster relational supports. These factors included intimate relationships, family unit, network of friends, organizational structures, and physical setting (Schlossberg, 1981). Primary external supports described by the participants in my study included communities or individuals from whom they drew support, including colleagues from other institutions, spouses, peers within the same department, peers at the same level in the community college, supervisors, and students themselves. One participant described tangible, formal, external supports in the form of explicit symbolism about her institution's shared values and commitment to working with students. She connected physical setting as an aid to developing camaraderie and support: Her office location and proximity to other peers helped her connect to the institutional and departmental community for resources and motivation. Geographic closeness to family was also an element of physical setting that contributed largely to the sense of community and supports that this participant and others felt helped support their transition.

Despite the fact that it spans different aspects of external or environmental supports, one theme in particular emerged as a finding: the importance of finding community to support the transition between graduate-school and community-college culture. Although participants named specific individuals and roles, a sense of community served as a primary theme in their transition

stories. This finding aligns with previous research on the topic of student-affairs professional socialization. For example, Pittman and Foubert (2016) studied the influential factors associated with professional identity development among 542 individuals either in a graduate program or one completed within 5 years. Their findings identified the role of a mentor or supervisor to be among the most influential factors of professional identity development among those in this first phase of their careers (Pittman & Foubert, 2016). Although this earlier study does not disaggregate by institutional culture or type, and it includes participants still in graduate school, it identified these types of external, relational supports as important to emerging and new professionals in the broader field.

It is important to note, however, one specific disconnect between this study and my findings. For the five participants I interviewed, the most impactful external supports emerged in their lived experiences *after* they had secured professional work in community-college student affairs. Two participants, Isabella and Emily, described mentoring relationships with supervisors in graduate internships and assistantships as helpful in their understanding what community-college work might look like in practice, but neither attributed these relationships as being exceptionally critical in helping them enter community-college culture. Their experiences partially align with findings from a previous qualitative study that explored community-college student-affairs professionals' entry into the field. The results of that study showed that informal experiences and one-on-one interactions provided valuable information to support transition, and that some individuals were more likely to gain learning from relational interactions than through their educational preparation (Hornak et al., 2016). However, the findings from the current study and the Hornak et al. study diverge slightly. In the Hornak et al. study, the researchers found that many of these connections were facilitated through formal structures and systems such as

meetings, conferences, and networking. Only one participant from my study shared that a formal, statewide meeting had connected her to peers who provided the support she needed to navigate the unique resource strains she encountered at a community college. By contrast, the participants I interviewed described supports related to sense of community that fell within the context of their respective colleges and even functional units, but not through organized networks.

This sense of community that participants described is congruent with findings from a review of 300 community-college student-affairs officers who largely described their mentoring relationships as informal, built within the field itself, and not necessarily connected to the professional pipeline (Rodkins, 2011, as cited in Knight, 2014). Only one participant directly shared the importance of her graduate-assistantship supervisor at a regional campus in providing her with knowledge and training that eased her transition to a community college later on. Others mentioned internships and assistantships that provided exposure to the field, but support from the respective supervisor or mentor in those contexts was not fully articulated or meaningful in their broader narrative.

The findings of the current study suggest that support came after participants secured professional work. They described supervisors as supportive navigators who helped several of the participants to navigate the unique cultural aspects of community-college work, such as their broad roles, how to adapt programming for certain student populations, and the role of serving as a sounding board or “check” when their ideas misaligned with institutional culture or student needs. They also described supervisors’ impact, however, as a component of the broader outcome related to *finding community*, which also included those working in similar roles or in areas in which the participants regularly interacted. They discovered their sense of finding community to support their transition within the institutional cultures themselves, which they

described using phrases such as “it is a family-like atmosphere,” “working so closely made it easy to find camaraderie,” and “I can send a message, and I know someone will answer me.”

In their examination of the experiences of individuals working in community-college student affairs, Hornak et al. (2016) found a perceived tension between those working in student-affairs roles with formal preparation to do so and those who had been placed in the role via other hiring practices or preferences at the institution itself. One participant in my study shared a similar and particularly unique experience of finding community within her institution, compared to the other four narratives. The participant described her primary external supports within her institution as her peers with the same background and training in student affairs and higher education leadership. She shared that these relationships helped her cope with the strange organizational structure and promotion patterns she had observed in the environment. This particular participant shared much of the same perspective captured in the Hornak et al. study regarding differences between those who had formal preparation for the work and those who did not. She also expressed frustration over how these differences were seemingly overlooked in her institution’s hiring and advancement practices. In her work, she observed a culture that prompted her to question whether or not her institution placed value on formal education related to leadership and student affairs. Although this was a source of tension for her working in the culture, similar to the participants in the Hornak et al. (2016) study, she leveraged this network of institutional peers with common experience to find and serve as an external support when she encountered cultural disconnects with her student-affairs training.

Overwhelmingly, participants in this study described a highly collegial, supportive, and community-like environment in which they carried out their work as student-affairs professionals. This finding is consistent with previous literature that describes community-

college culture as “[expected to produce] extraordinary amounts of work, but do so in an environment that is highly collaborative and team-oriented” and “taking the notion of family to a different meaning” (Hirt, 2006, p. 155).

Internal Factors That Support Transition: Self and Strategy

According to Schlossberg’s theory of transition (2011), no two individuals may experience a transition in the same manner, even if the details of the transition appear to be similar on their surface. The internally derived characteristics and approaches one adopts, or draws from, help to make meaning of misalignments the individual may experience, and combine to build the coping mechanisms needed to successfully transition (Schlossberg, 2011). These factors are, of course, uniquely woven by the individuals’ personalities, past experiences from which they can draw reference, and their tolerance for ambiguity. Earlier literature also has describe personal transitions as fluid and nonsequential, but also as providing the context for personal growth and meaning making that adds to individuals’ sense of self and their collection of experiences from which to draw future coping mechanisms (Anderson et al., 2012).

Self: Social Justice and Doing Work That Matters

In Chapter 2, I described community colleges as institutions that grew from social-justice roots and in opposition to America’s earlier forms of higher education, which were far more exclusionary and elite by comparison (Heelan & Mellow, 2017; Wilder, 2014). Social justice was noted in previous literature as one of the unique characteristics of community colleges as organizations. Additionally, individuals who closely identify with social justice as a core part of their value system and personal identity have a deeper understanding of their impact within larger systems (Edwards, 2006). In the current study, the participants used phrases such as “heart of a teacher,” “self-identified social-justice advocate,” and “seeing my student-centered values in

action” to reflect their personal beliefs and attitudes regarding their work and as congruent with the community-college culture; and they specifically identified these characteristics as factors that helped draw them into and navigate their professional roles. Given this congruence between their individual selves and the environments they experienced, it is not surprising that one of the findings from my study (*doing work that matters*) supports the presence of social justice as an important cultural element of community-college student-affairs work. The participants’ sentiment toward their work as mattering is also shared with the community-college student-affairs professionals Hirt (2006) studied. Hirt described the rewards these professionals gain from their work as intrinsic, and essentially as “conducting meaningful work in a positive environment and having good relationships with those around them” (p. 155).

Palomba and Banta (1999) described higher education overall as fulfilling three central purposes in modern society: education, research, and community/public service; and they described the primary contribution of community colleges as the latter (community/public service). Findings from my study support this notion at an individual level, with *doing work that matters* emerging as a key internally, or self-derived factor in supporting the transition between graduate preparation and community-college student-affairs work. Participants from my study shared a common belief that their work in community colleges matters both to individual students, the surrounding community, and society as a whole. These internally derived values about community service and intrinsic desire to help others became ignited by the community-college environment, in which participants began to see the impact of their work and contributions. As a finding, the significant role these internal beliefs played in participants’ transition from one culture to another is consistent with previous research about the importance

of values alignment between identity and environment in student-affairs work (Hirschy et al., 2015).

Historically, education has been viewed as a gateway to socioeconomic mobility, and community colleges play a critical role in widening access to higher education within American society (Heelan & Mellow, 2017). By contrast, critics of community colleges note their role in stratification and in reinforcing social hierarchies within the larger macrosystem of higher education (Ingram & Morrissey, 2009; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Findings from my study align, in part, with both of these perspectives. First, each of the five participants believed their contributions in community-college student-affairs work to have a great impact on students' lives and futures, and this belief that their work mattered drew them further into the culture. At times, in the narratives, community-college students were described as "needing this," "needing us," or "resilient." Because of the complex challenges the participants encountered when working with adult learners, unemployed individuals, students raising children, or individuals from low-income backgrounds, they viewed their work as high impact and with social value.

However, this impact is not achieved easily. Other findings from the current study also reveal the extraordinary amount of effort, adaptability, and support structures required for the five participants to help students earn entry-level certificates, and the extent to which workforce-development needs may drive the direction of the college's programs. Despite previous literature that has described community colleges as acting in social contract and as open doors to higher education access in America (Heelan & Mellow, 2017), only two participants, Emily and Hillary, briefly mentioned working with students on transfer planning or the educational ladder within the macrosystem of higher education. Participants in the current study generally referenced doing work that matters when they were speaking about helping students enter the workforce or exit

poverty. Although the participants certainly put forth significant effort to remove barriers for students, this tendency toward acute problem solving may be a factor in critical perspectives that view community colleges as complacent in social stratification (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). To be sure, community-college professionals such as those in this study work with undergraduate students to identify next steps in both their higher education pursuits and career aspirations; however, the significant amount of work that the participants described is required to address immediate, short-term, and basic needs of their students may unintentionally shortchange long-term educational planning. The lived work experiences of the participants are perhaps an example of how community colleges, at an institutional level, may inadvertently challenge the equitable attainment of higher education credentials, as described by Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015).

Interestingly, however, participants' understanding of their work as something that mattered did not develop uniformly, and this inconsistency also partially supports the critical view of community colleges as complacent in social stratification. While *doing work that matters* was one of two key findings regarding internal factors supporting transition, it is important to note that not all participants entered community-college work without bias. For example, Hillary and Ematha both had to overcome previously held beliefs and biases about community colleges serving only low-income or academically underprepared students. Now that they were community-college advocates and deeply passionate about their work, this internal evolution and self-described feeling of kinship with the subculture provided them with some level of alignment with more critical perspectives about the sector itself. For example, Hillary and Ematha's previously held beliefs about community colleges serving only those who "cannot" or "should not" attend universities, whereas students from lower socioeconomic status who enter higher

education may or may not advance within the system, support what Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015) described as a sociological and stratification view of the sector. Hillary and Ematha, however, also described shifting to an intensive, highly student-centered way of working once they began to challenge these biases. This shift prompted them to see themselves as critically important to supporting students in any way they could; in essence, adopting the ethical responsibility Ingram and Morrissey (2009) challenged community colleges to consider: Is access without completion ethical? Hillary, in fact, described her shift in mindset as accepting that students she once thought were “fragile” were actually “more resilient than anything.” This realization of the role of systems and individual challenges that led her students to community college empowered her to act as “the student[s]’ voice” and find ways to increase student success and completion, which she described was one of the most rewarding parts of her job.

Strategy: Graduate School As a Frame for Meaning Making

Whereas strategies manifest externally when enacted, the roots from which the strategies themselves are developed involve the internal sense-making processes individuals develop to cope with or support personal transitions (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 2011). Findings aligned with the first research question, focused on graduate preparation and community-college student-affairs work as separate but related cultures, identified several areas in which participants experienced misalignment between these two cultures. Examples include surprises about (a) the extent to which their professional roles stretched across unit boundaries, (b) organizational structure and dynamics, (c) adaptation of practices to fit diverse student populations, and (d) the influence of local community stakeholders in their work.

This misalignment is not surprising, of course, given one of the premises upon which this study’s research problem has been rooted: that “the student affairs profession emerged in the

traditional, four-year college environment and thus predates the widespread expansion of community colleges” (Helfgot, 2005, p. 8). When faced with misalignments between these two separate but related cultures, each of the five participants I interviewed drew from an internal portfolio of supports to make sense of these moments. Their graduate-program experiences, however, emerged as the primary frame of reference that guided their thinking and interpretation.

Seeking to understand how new student-affairs professionals navigate moments of dissonance between their preparation and workplaces, Perez (2016) found that individuals’ ability to overcome misalignments was somewhat dependent on their functional capacity for meaning making. In the case of my study, three of the participants attributed the graduate-school practicum, program structure, and class content in combination as a frame of reference from which they drew understanding about what they were experiencing within the community colleges themselves. In these cases, graduate school added to participants’ functional capacity to make meaning of the cultural elements they encountered. Although the three participants’ exposure to community-college content or topics in graduate school was not uniform, those who were able to reference an internship, specific textbook, or class discussion shared how these interactions had prepared them for encountering unique job descriptions, community stakeholders, and the types of students they served. In essence, and aligned with Perez’s (2016) findings, these participants had gained functional capacity to independently and internally understand what they were experiencing and draw conclusions about the best strategies to apply to successfully navigate the culture.

By contrast, two other participants also referred to graduate-school preparation as a frame for making meaning of their transition to community-college culture, but they used their graduate-program experiences in a comparative way to what they encountered in community-

college student-affairs work. Rather than drawing from graduate experiences to affirm or understand the differences they encountered in their student-affairs work, these two participants described encounters that prompted them to rethink assumptions they had from graduate school. Their graduate-school experiences served a purpose that could be considered the reverse of their counterparts in the study: Those who had previous knowledge spotted the nuances in practice and used what they knew to shape their strategies; the two other participants applied a critical lens to what their programs had taught them, and then engaged in strategies to recalibrate their knowledge and practice to fit the culture in which they had been immersed. In either case, graduate-school preparation served as a frame of reference, or starting point, from which they could organize, develop, and understand their internally developed transition strategies.

Findings from this study diverge from previous results of a quantitative analysis of alumni from graduate programs in student affairs, which found that 42% of participants had completed practical experiences at the institution in which their graduate program was housed (Young, 2019). By contrast, all but one of the five participants in my study had a graduate assistantship, an internship, or part-time work at an institution different from the one that housed their graduate programs. Another area of disconnect with Young's (2019) study is in reference to Young's leadership and the application of theory as specific competency areas in which applied experiences could bring about significant gains. Rather, my study revealed that management (and related areas such as strategic planning, supervision, and resource acquisition) and application of student-development theory were two areas in which the participants felt there was misalignment and an overall lack of preparedness in their ability to navigate community-college culture. Although this outcome conflicts with Young (2019), it is in fact in alignment with a later review of curricula that found only 9% of graduate programs designed to prepare student-affairs

professionals included explicitly stated content related to management and supervision (Young & Dean, 2016). Recognition of this gap was shared by the two participants who entered the field as unit leaders, though both also shared that they were pleasantly surprised to have been given a chance to manage a functional area so early in their careers.

Findings from this study do, however, support one of the results from Young (2019), in that graduate internships and assistantships were found to be influential in graduate students' learning and application of content, especially in the areas of leadership, career preparation, and use of theory. The four participants I interviewed who had previous exposure to community college through these types of opportunities shared the importance of the applied learning in providing them with exposure and a frame of reference for understanding community colleges' organizational structure, culture, and mission. Nevertheless, graduate preparation program experiences emerged in my study as a significant internal contributor to the strategies the participants activated to support their transition between that experience and their professional roles in community-college student affairs. Internships, graduate assistantships, and college teaching experiences all helped the participants develop a sense of their strengths, the functional areas, and the institutional types that would best align with their visions of their future professional selves.

Of note, the role of applied learning through practicum and internships (or, in the case of Hillary, part-time concurrent work in the field) as critical sources of meaning making and strategy development should not be overlooked and aligns with earlier studies that continue to affirm their benefits within graduate preparation for student affairs. In a previously mentioned quantitative study, Liddell et al. (2014) surveyed 178 entry-level professionals and found that out-of-class experiences were perceived as more beneficial than in-class experiences in aiding

skills, knowledge, and involvement in seven out of 11 defined competency areas, including “helping to understand the institutional culture of a workplace” (p. 78). The lived experiences shared during participant narratives coincide with this earlier finding: Community-college internships, a graduate assistantship in a regional campus environment, and concurrent part-time work at a community college while in graduate school were all mentioned by participants as experiences that helped them understand how community colleges operate and serve students, and also helped them to see themselves as potential contributors to the culture after graduation.

This is not to say that in-class experiences did not contribute to the participants’ reliance on graduate-school experiences as a frame for understanding and supporting their internal transition strategies. Rather, conversations with classmates, classroom discussions, and, in Katy’s case, a textbook all contributed to their understanding of community colleges as a unique institutional type, whether participants had attended during or after completion of their graduate studies. Two participants from the same graduate program described the diversity of the program’s internship and course offerings, and also certifications designed to prepare students to work in specific areas within higher education, as factors that created exposure and helped them understand cultural differences across institutional types. This formal, targeted exposure to institutional types within the larger macrosystem of higher education was beneficial to the participants who experienced it, and the impact they described is consistent with what participants in the Royer et al. (2016) study shared about their experiences in a community-college-specific course. In that study, semistructured interviews helped to collect student reflections on a targeted course experience, which increased the students’ curiosity about working in community colleges, reversed their personal biases about the sector itself, and helped

illuminate ways that institutional types can work together to support transfer and educational attainment (Royer et al., 2016).

Student-development theories have been identified as cornerstones of student-affairs practice, and they emerged organically as a graduate-school-derived topic in my interviews with the study's five participants. This is not necessarily surprising, given that earlier studies have identified knowledge of student-development theories as among the top competencies desired by mid- and senior-level student-affairs hiring managers (Burkhard et al., 2005), and that they are also listed in the set of professional competencies set forth by the field's leading professional organizations (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Two participants in particular specifically described making adjustments to their previous learning in this area, describing their strategies to find a balance between student-development theories as a basis for practice and the busy, low-income, and nontraditional students they supported in their roles. Across all participants, and as described previously, the participants perceived their roles as broad, adaptive, and highly student centered, and eventually each found ways of working with students that prioritized clarity of information, problem-solving on behalf of their students, and efforts to simplify students' access to assistance and support. Ematha once believed "harsher" approaches to working with students aided in their development of the skills they needed postgraduation, and she had assumed this was one of the ways in which those working in higher education could help students learn. In her first role, she found an approach that felt more to her what she described as "a labor of love," which challenged the previous frame she had used to construct her interactions with undergraduate students during graduate school. Her graduate-school experience, while it did not remain central to her student-service approach, still provided the basis for her comparison and meaning making when she encountered new observations and experiences.

The prevalence of this type of strategic, internal evolution from previous learning, even discussed specifically in relationship to student-development theories by two participants, aligns with a think piece that called for adaptation of such theories to more directly relate to students in community-college settings (Ozaki, 2016). The fact that several participants needed to adjust their approaches and overall philosophy of working with students also dovetails with the opinion that student-affairs training has been rooted in theories and practices to inform work in 4-year settings (Tull et al., 2015). The participants' efforts to adjust to better serve their students within their community colleges also reflects a caution Eaton (2015) set forth regarding standard competencies that have built the profession: "[Experiences] may challenge the linear structuring as presently articulated, causing individuals to revisit, revise, or eliminate position and learning that was previously achieved within a certain competency" (p. 577). Although student-affairs professionals are, in general, likely to apply strategies to reconcile what they have learned with the cultural nuances of any institutional context (Hirt, 2006), the internal strategies the five participants within this study conveyed were prompted by their perceived misalignments within community colleges.

Graduate school provided a frame of reference from which new strategies grew, but not all facets of the graduate-school experience noted in previous literature were present in my findings. For example, although community colleges are largely invisible in higher education literature, and university faculty within student affairs or related programs may not interact with community colleges enough to research their nuances (Floyd et al., 2016; Townsend et al., 2005), the individuals I interviewed did not directly reference this specific source of misalignment. However, the participants gave subtle reference to this gap on two occasions.

First, in describing her thoughts on community colleges as a subculture of higher education, Hillary shared that she felt

Everything else is implied that it [higher education] pertains to the 4-year . . . there's not enough research in the area, maybe that gives them a bad reputation, or that we [community colleges] do not have [produce] the 6-year graduation rate the 4-years do.

In this description, Hillary shared a brief observation about invisibility in literature and research.

Separately, Emily shared that she wanted to move into educational research and earn a doctoral degree. A situational factor recently prompted Emily's move to a professional role in a university, but her dream of engaging in research and earning a doctorate was one of the reasons she had accepted this shift away from community-college work:

I am doing a lot of data analysis on education programs, and I'm hoping to use this opportunity to get my PhD, which I couldn't do at a community college, and do more research on this [topic].

Emily's personal experience of community-college environments as not conducive to these activities support what Kelly-Kleese (2044) shared in a think piece regarding potential reasons for the lack of community-college presence in higher education discourse. In the piece, the author suggested that incentive structures and responsibilities within community-college practice do not necessarily support research and publications; rather, the culture favors practitioner work, service, and teaching (Kelly-Kleese, 2004). These brief and subtle references from the participants while they were discussing other topics suggest how disparities may begin to emerge in literature, discourse, and graduate-program teaching, as indicated by previous research on the invisibility of the community-college perspective in these contexts. How this invisibility, then, influences graduate preparation, which largely occurs in university settings, framed the research problem discussed in this current study.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study suggest implications for practice in both community colleges and graduate preparation programs, and also in higher education overall. In the case of student-affairs preparation, this ongoing examination of the systems in which individuals learn and prepare for careers challenges us to accept the perspectives from which they have been created, and also to understand those for which the experiences may not align. Understanding how community-college student-affairs professionals experience both environments, and also factors that support adaptation during the transition experience, introduces new perspectives that may challenge current approaches to professional preparation in student affairs. In addition, findings from this study also have implication for community colleges as institutions of higher education, and especially for hiring managers and chief student-affairs officers currently working within this unique sector of higher education. Organizational structure and dynamics, and a deeper understanding of the situational factors that may guide or prevent emerging student-affairs professionals from seeking or securing work in community-college environments, can help to bridge cultural chasms, as well. Both systems can work in tandem to fortify the field of student affairs and the macrosystem of higher education overall, and in doing so can facilitate students' exploration of this unique and important subculture and the opportunities therein.

Implications for Community Colleges

Despite deep commitment by community colleges to open access and providing educational pathways to those underserved by other forms of higher education, significant lags in community-college completion and transfer by students remain (Shapiro et al., 2017). Community colleges are clearly agile and adaptable in their approaches to working with such diverse stakeholders and students, as demonstrated by previous literature (Gulley, 2018; Hirt,

2006; Latz et al., 2017; Tull et al., 2015) and evidenced by the lived experiences of the five participants interviewed for this study. However, additional evolution is needed to fully realize the potential and output of these institutions. This is especially true as community colleges gain capacity to continue their level of service commitment and relentless focus on student needs, as the participants in this study described. Today's community colleges, with a renewed emphasis on student services, holistic student supports, and equity in outcomes through national networks such as Achieving the Dream and the AACCC, are wise to focus on developing excellence in student-affairs administration and services (Knight, 2014). Even as one can argue that community colleges have, in fact, excelled in understanding and meeting student needs, the narratives shared in this study set forth areas of opportunity when it comes to these institutions attracting new professionals, building strong pipelines to support emerging student-affairs leaders, and elevating their work innovations to the level of those widely known and accepted in the view provided through the dominant lens of the 4-year university.

In addition, community-college professionals, especially those working in student affairs, should be encouraged to seek opportunities that reverse the underrepresentation reflected within the literature and among the ranks of universities' higher education and student-affairs faculty. This invisibility has led to a previously discussed phenomenon the participants in this study experienced firsthand: A dominant culture that begins to draw subcultures closer to its center (Dowd & Dowd, 2003). This phenomenon may explain why graduate programs, especially those without extensive resources or whose partnerships are limited by geographic locations, may inadvertently skew their program content, discussions, and opportunities toward the dominant center. By centering the longstanding structures of higher education from which other institutional types have formed, a broader, and clearer, and more unified understanding of

student-affairs practice and higher education leadership begins to form. While student-affairs preparation programs may struggle to address all of the institutional nuances prevalent within the American higher education system, those individuals with community-college experience who choose to pursue teaching, practitioner-based research, and publication can begin to build a critical, collective voice in graduate preparation. Practitioner experiences such as those highlighted in this study can provide important insight into how to combine foundational elements of student-development theories with flexible and efficient student-service structures, and to introduce innovative ways to manage change and institutional resources. These valuable competencies, although derived from a subculture of higher education, can be broadly applied to emerging professionals' future work in nearly any institutional type.

To be sure, these efforts will require community colleges to be intentional about building professional pipelines and highlighting the impressive student-affairs work that occurs within this unique, agile, student-centered culture. As Underwood and Austin (2016) have reminded the higher education community at large, the majority of student-affairs preparation programs are housed at universities, so the connection needs to be intentional and perhaps may seem inconvenient. In addition, community colleges do not necessarily provide incentives for professionals working within their institutions who wish to engage in practitioner-based authorship or teaching outside of the sector itself (Kelly-Kleese, 2004). However, these are among the internal organizational structures and dynamics with which community colleges may need to grapple, in addition to the challenges the participants in this study described as they experienced community-college culture firsthand. Of course, the five participants interviewed for this study expressed overwhelmingly positive experiences related to their personal transitions. However, opportunities for community colleges to strengthen practices regarding hiring,

promotion, incentives supporting educational attainment in key disciplines, and creation of additional presence within the broader higher education discourse remain as opportunities.

The five participants in this study described meaningful graduate experiences related to teaching, internships, and practicum opportunities, which can also be accepted as rationale for community colleges to build additional paraprofessional experiences that increase exposure to community-college work. Even as only 27% of chief student-affairs officers in community colleges describe their mentoring relationships as formal (Rodkins, 2011, as cited in Knight, 2014), creating additional opportunities for connection, exposure, and mentoring may help future student-affairs professionals explore diverse institutional types or challenge personal biases about the types of students they may serve in different settings.

It is clear, both from earlier literature and from the findings within this study, that community colleges truly are unique in their ability to foster connection and a family-like atmosphere that hosts impressive levels of collaboration and unity. As noted previously, community-college student-affairs professionals such as those whose stories are highlighted in this narrative inquiry are considered producers (Hirt, 2006) for their commitment to mission, their ability to critically think about topics widely accepted by the broader higher education culture, and their deep connection to student service. Community-college leaders, along with others leading America's community colleges, will also find the stories in this study beneficial to understanding the role, function, and significance of the student-services teams working within their institutions. In addition, community-college student-affairs professionals can examine their own institutional cultures to identify opportunities for the informal (and formal) experiences that help shape professional identity among their teams. Intentional and culturally informed onboarding that helps to accelerate transition into the broad, adaptive, highly localized, and

uniquely structured culture will only help to validate new professionals such as Ematha, Hillary, Katy, Emily, and Isabella in their choice to do the work that matters.

Last, it is important to recognize that, although this study illuminates differences between graduate preparation and community-college work, there is still a shared professional kinship that links all individuals who contribute to the field of student affairs, regardless of background. Recognizing the organizational dynamics associated with those who have experienced formal preparation and those who entered the field via an alternative path, community-college student-affairs leaders can explore ways to deepen the connection to the professional community as a whole. Findings from this study reveal how community-college cultural differences have contributed to the development of a subculture; at the same time, individuals who are performing student-affairs work, regardless of institutional type, are still united under a shared professional identity and set of guiding principles (Ozaki, 2016; Tull et al., 2015). While community colleges may experience a level of invisibility within some corners of the higher education community, efforts to continue to close these gaps and link professionals together is likely to help all community-college student-affairs professionals engage in collective dialogue to advance the field.

Implications for Graduate Preparation Programs

Understanding how new professionals transition between graduate preparation and community-college student affairs provides valuable awareness of how individuals experience dissonance and the supports that are most significant in the transition. The meaning-making processes the participants in this study shared speak to the original significance of this inquiry. Deepening our understanding of internal and external factors that support this transition can

illuminate two gaps: (a) those that exist between the two cultures, and (b) a lack of opportunities that might enable better alignment of the two.

Meaning making is a tenant of the constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Glesne, 2011), and we can derive much from the processes individuals employ to understand experiences, no matter how individualized their factors. For individuals designing, teaching in, or leading graduate preparation programs, the participants' stories of meaning making and transition are especially important in moving toward action:

Faculty and supervisors may gain insight into students' meaning making capacities by asking questions such as "How did you come to that conclusion?" and "What influenced your decision-making?" By surfacing students' underlying assumptions, faculty and supervisors may ascertain the extent to which graduate students follow external formulas and listen to their internal voices, and can adjust their approaches to working with students accordingly. (Perez, 2017, p. 848)

For this study specifically, the participant narratives reveal the underlying assumptions previous graduate students held as they moved between their programs and community-college student-affairs roles. Based on the eight findings that address the three research questions, those who develop and administer graduate preparation programs might critically examine their curriculum, internship and practicum experiences, and partnerships with diverse institutional types to identify opportunities to better support the transition to work. Participant interviews and findings from this study revealed four key characteristics that differentiate graduate preparation and community-college student-affairs work as two separate, but related, cultures: (a) broad and adaptive roles, (b) impact of localization, (c) comparative language ("especially at community colleges"), and (d) organizational structures and dynamics. However, the internal and external factors that supported the participants in their transition between these two cultures provide insight into opportunities for further alignment. For example, integrating diversity in practicum sites, introducing a book such as *Where You Work Matters* (Hirt, 2006) into a class discussion

about organization and administration in higher education, guiding students to experiment with research and experiences in different types of institutions, making connections to community-college professionals, and presenting functional areas as integrated rather than siloed are all examples of intentional framing, based on the study's findings, from which students can draw when faced with a future transition.

Graduate school, as a frame for reference and one of the main internally derived factors within the findings, presents a significant implication of this study. The participants' reliance on their graduate experiences to guide their meaning making or provide a contrast from which misalignments could be identified, underscores the importance of graduate programs focused on the development of skills and acquisition of knowledge necessary for students to successfully navigate the field. Based on imbalances identified in previous literature and the participants themselves, graduate-school faculty and program coordinators can begin to exert intentional efforts to address the invisibility of community colleges in the literature, viewpoints, textbooks, terminology and case studies they incorporate into the student experience. Acknowledging that housing, residence life, and personal experiences for undergraduates pave the most traveled pathways into the profession (Liddell et al., 2014), efforts to build students' awareness of alternatives can help to identify those who enjoy direct student services, have the "heart of a teacher," and seek work that matters, and guide them toward community-college work.

Situational factors emerged in this study as an exceptionally salient external component in the participants' transitions from graduate preparation into community-college student affairs. The presence of situational factors such as finances, family situations, and geographic limitations that impacted the participants' job searches is also an important finding to inform graduate preparation; it also supports the notion that students may benefit from learning about institutional

types regardless of their career goals. Like the participants in this study and those in Hornak et al. (2016), new student-affairs professionals may simply end up working in an unanticipated institutional type as the result of geographic limitations, financial needs, or family demands. In addition, an understanding of the role of community colleges in the larger macrosystem of higher education may also have a positive impact on neutralizing bias against community colleges and help new professionals understand how to work with diverse populations within any setting (Royer et al., 2016). Given the increased focus on student transfer and connectivity within higher education as a system, an increased understanding of community-college environments and student populations serves student-affairs professionals well, regardless of the type of institution they enter after graduation.

Implications for Higher Education Culture Overall

Findings from this study have identified and set forth cultural differences between graduate preparation and community-college student affairs. Participants identified areas of misalignment and disconnects, and noted at times that their graduate preparation was situated with a view through a lens that assumed student-affairs functions are carried out in a 4-year, university context. Three of the four participants, however, did connect with community colleges while they were in graduate school, through formal internships and practicum experiences. One participant also worked part-time at a community college while concurrently attending graduate school. Only one participant first experienced a community-college setting after completion of graduate school. However, across all five participants, the narratives illustrated areas of misalignment that they attributed to differences between community-college culture and the dominant, 4-year lens through which much of higher education's dialogue and perspective has been constructed.

Overall, the findings in this study illuminate community colleges as a uniquely situated form of higher education within our nation's postsecondary macrosystem. Fundamentally designed to contrast with the exclusive universities that preceded their inception, community colleges play an important role in providing access to higher education through an implied social contract (Heelan & Mellow, 2017), and they now serve more than 40% of undergraduates enrolled in American higher education. Despite this shift, emerging professionals in community-college student affairs experience their formal training and entry into these institutions as separate, but related, and with misalignments that they need to resolve by drawing from internal and external supports.

While this study's findings largely bring forth implications for graduate preparation programs and community colleges themselves, the findings also prompt those working outside of both of these cultures to apply a critical lens when they are reviewing literature, scanning higher education headlines, setting forth new research, or viewing institutional types through a hierarchical lens. In discovering and finding values congruence with doing work that matters as community-college professionals, participants in this study had to confront their own personal biases and assumptions about the types of students community colleges serve and the work that occurs within their walls. Although these biases were internally derived and rooted in personal experiences, the invisibility of community colleges within mainstream, higher education discourse may contribute to these notions, especially if this discourse shapes the way students, future professionals, academics, and researchers view the role and function of today's community colleges. In this current study's literature review, in a section titled "Literature Review and Invisibility: A Perspective," I shared a personal reflection following my own experience in reviewing literature connected to the topics within this study. During my own

literature-review process, I too experienced the gaps and invisibility of community colleges in studies' findings, research design, and disaggregation of data across institutional types and functional areas in student affairs. Overall, community-college inclusion in general higher education research, discourse, and experiential learning opportunities remains an opportunity for continual growth and expansion.

Five individuals shared their stories of transition, and their lived experiences show mobility between institutions of higher education, thus illustrating the fluid nature of our macrosystem. The participants' stories and endorsement of community colleges as a subculture of higher education, and also the prominence of the phrase *especially at community colleges* differentiates this institutional type, and links to insight from literature: "Student affairs professionals feel that their institutions are marginalized within higher education" (Hirt, 2006, p. 145). As community colleges continue to evolve, expand, partner with other institutions, and serve student populations that truly reflect diversity in age, race, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics, findings from this study also have implications for higher education as a whole. Widening the conversation about student affairs and other broader issues facing higher education can draw those from the system's subcultures closer to the field as a whole. In turn, this deeper understanding of institutional type and the culture associated with each can, overall, create a more cohesive system in which students, faculty, and staff can move and easily transition.

Future Areas of Inquiry

Several limitations defined the boundaries of this study, but they provide opportunity for future research related to the research problem. Because this study was designed to expand our understanding of the lived transition experience of new professionals moving between graduate school and community-college student affairs, this research can be expanded to increase our

understanding of how these specific participants or others with similar characteristics experience the separate but related cultures over time. For example, do mid- or senior-level student-affairs professionals reflect differently upon their graduate preparation and transition to community-college work using different lenses compared to the new professionals who shared their stories in this study? This expanded research may also add to findings about organizational structure and dynamics as they relate to career advancement and an understanding of subculture based on its proximity to the leadership epicenter of the institution (Kuk, 2015).

Additionally, this study was designed to focus on graduate preparation narrowly designed to train individuals for professional work in the field of student affairs or higher education leadership. However, community-college student -affairs professionals enter their work through a variety of nontraditional pathways (Hirt, 2006; Tull et al., 2015); thus, further exploration into how student-affairs professionals from other disciplines or pathways experience community-college culture is recommended. For instance, a focus on individuals who came from alternative graduate-program disciplines, such as counseling or social work, or even worked their way into similar professional roles without formal preparation, would be of interest and provide alternative perspectives to the culture within community-college student affairs. By broadening the study's parameters and focusing on the cultural elements as experienced by a wider group of members, the definitions and descriptions of community colleges as a subculture of higher education may become more specifically defined.

Community colleges were at the center of this study, largely due to my own positionality as a long-time community-college professional and chief student-affairs officer. However, it is important to note that community colleges represent only one institutional type, and that students moving between graduate preparation and student affairs at other types of colleges may also

experience dissonance or elements of subculture as defined by Sebald (1975). *Where You Work Matters* (Hirt, 2006), one of the primary texts used to frame my research problem and also noted by one of the participants, illustrates how student-affairs work manifests in different and unique institutional cultures found within American higher education, such as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), tribal colleges, and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and also liberal arts, for-profit, research, and private institutions. Like community colleges, these unique institutional types may also be underrepresented in graduate-school preparation, leading future research to inquire, "How might graduates transition between their preparation and these additional separate, but related, cultures within higher education?" Given the diversity of institutional type into which graduates of student-affairs programs may enter, additional research can help to identify the nuanced transition experiences related to multiple subcultures within the field.

One specific theme identified in this study, diversity and professional development, provides an additional area for expanded research. Although it was addressed partially in my findings related to organizational structure and dynamics, the two participants who noted the cultural disconnect could only speculate as to what was behind this observation. The participants and I had discussed hypothetical reasons for this, including localized attitudes connected to diversity, or resource strains that lessened focus on professional development. However, the disconnect they experienced regarding diversity as a strong discussion topic in graduate school versus a much less present one in community-college culture was left unexplained. As diversity, equity, inclusion and, in general, community-college reform efforts continue to take root in many institutions, a deepened understanding of this potential divergence between preparation and work in the field is of particular interest.

Expanded research related to the adjustment and application of student-development theories in a community-college setting, as described by several of the participants, will also further findings from this study. In 2015, NASPA and ACPA released a jointly approved revision to the original set of professional competencies for student-affairs administrators from 2010. Within the updated standards, student-development theories referenced in a section titled “Student Development and Learning” includes a foundational competency: “Identify the dominant perspectives as well as strengths and limitations in applying theories and models to varying student demographic groups” (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 32). This revision encourages critical thinking in relationship to the theories that undergird the profession’s training, and prompts graduate students and new professionals to develop competency to identify and resolve the types of misalignments between theory and application participants described in their narratives. Several years beyond the adoption of this revised set of competencies, it is likely that graduate programs may have diversified the specific theories presented, or may have applied new ways of examining their intersection with student and institutional type. In what ways has this relaunch of guiding competencies, issued jointly from significantly influential organizations leading the field, changed the manner in which individuals are trained to enter student affairs as a profession within such a diverse setting as higher education? Graduate students who transition into community-college student-affairs work in the coming years may reference or use theories in a different manner than the participants in this study, and thus this shift also provides an area for expanded research.

Broad, adaptive, and meaningful roles were cornerstones of the participants’ experiences in this current study, and the participants’ holistic approach to triaging students’ needs was exceptional and reflective of the hallmarks of community-college student affairs (Hirt, 2006).

Additional research, however, is needed to understand how community-college student-affairs professionals, such as those who participated in this current study, specifically view what they describe as “work that matters.” Does the work that matters pertain to creating access and local contributions, or does it also include upward mobility and broader de-stratification within the macrosystem of higher education? In a previous section, I noted the participants’ descriptions of their work as responsive, agile, and caring; but I also highlighted the potential lack of focus on transfer mobility and the process of assisting students with educational planning beyond the community college itself. Researchers such as Baldwin (2017) have pointed to structural rifts in transfer mobility; however, understanding how student-affairs professionals specifically view their role in balancing students’ immediate needs and further educational attainment is an area for future research and understanding. Specifically, understanding how community-college student-affairs professionals define, facilitate, and carry out work that matters is an important piece of scholar-practitioner inquiry that can strengthen community colleges’ progress on completion rates, transfer, and connection to career opportunities.

Summary

The lived experiences highlighted in this study illuminate graduate preparation for student affairs, and work in community colleges, as two separate but related cultures. To make meaning of the differences when the participants encountered them, each participant relied on an individualized collection of internal and external supports, unique to their situations, personality types, family and friendship structures, and previous experiences from which they could compare and contrast to understand what they encountered. Among the most salient themes across their unique stories, however, are noticeable differences in the broad and adaptive roles within the student-affairs functions in community colleges, subtle differences that can only be explained

with a qualifier such as “especially in community colleges,” the influence of the local environment and community on their institutions’ focus, and unique organizational structures and dynamics. These differences, as observed and experienced by Ematha, Hillary, Katy, Emily, and Isabella, shed light on the relationship between graduate-school preparation and what can be considered a “subculture” of higher education: community colleges. To successfully reconcile these differences and support their transition, each participant drew from internal supports (graduate school and their commitments to doing work that mattered). Their transitions were also supported by external factors, especially in the form of communities and the situations that led them to their roles in or out of community-college culture. These experiences, shared through the stories of the participants, shed light on potential gaps that can be addressed through ongoing research and evolution of graduate-school preparation, and also through deeper connectivity between various cultures and systems within higher education. These efforts and deeper understanding of the transition itself can elevate community colleges as a unique institutional type and build the strong professional pipelines needed to support student success within these unique, open-access settings.

The participants’ experiences with this specific transition corroborate with previous literature, including studies and think pieces that identified community-college student-affairs work as expansive, collaborative, and responsive (Gulley, 2018; Hirt, 2006; Tull et al., 2015); requiring sophisticated systems and approaches to adapt to the multiple pathways students pursue (Baldwin, 2017; Baston, 2018); influenced by its local community and context (Ayers, 2017; Askin, 2007; Hirt, 2006); built via unique and varied professional pipelines (Dalpes et al., 2015; Kisker, 2005); organized within flat organizational structures that limit advancement (Hornak et al., 2016); and grounded in social justice and contributing to a broader role in society (Heelan &

Mellow, 2017). Some of the terms that emerged from the participants' stories also aligned with previous research that identified specific terms, such as *workforce development*, that are more prevalent in community-college journals compared to those that cater to the dominant, broader field of higher education (Floyd et al., 2016). The more ambiguous boundaries around culture, which Dowd and Dowd (2003) explained are difficult to fully articulate and determine, also emerged as a phenomenon in this study, as several of the participants incorporated a generic, qualifying colloquialism ("especially at community colleges") within their stories. However, the participants' stories diverge slightly from other areas of previous research, specifically those that define student affairs as an general profession, as one focused on developing student identity, (Helfgot, 2005) and recommendations that diversity serve as a critical topic in which community colleges should engage in purposeful professional development and dialogue (Aragon & Brantmeier, 2009).

This study's findings also support the concept of community colleges as a subculture of higher education, affirmed by the lived experiences, observations, and meaning-making processes of five new community-college professionals working in student affairs. The transitions of these new professionals, however, from graduate school into this unique subculture of higher education, were supported by individualized tapestries of internal and external supports. Although each was unique, that the participants' transitions align with previous findings about student affairs as a profession that draws individuals who wish to do meaningful work (Taub & McEwen, 2006) may bring about organizational challenges or misalignments within community-college contexts (Hornak et al., 2016) and also aspects of graduate school as an important personal experience from which to draw meaning, comparison, and strategies for transition (Liddell et al., 2014; Perez, 2016; Royer et al., 2016).

Some elements of the participants' narratives contrast expectations set forth from previous literature. Although the literature suggests that many students complete assistantships and experiences at the institution in which their program is housed (Young, 2019), participants in this study had more diversified experiences across institutional type while they were in graduate school. Other areas of divergence or contrast can be found in the participants' external supports coming from less formal networks than those suggested by Hornak et al. (2016), and less frequent experiences with dialogue centered on issues of diversity compared to what we might expect in an environment serving such unique populations of students (Aragon & Brantmeier, 2009).

Of course, these areas of alignment and disconnect both strengthen our understanding of this specific transitional experience and invite additional questions about the cultures themselves and the supports individuals rely upon to reconcile differences they encounter. The experiences of the five participants bring topics covered in literature and previous studies to life, adding stories that deepen the landscape of research in these areas.

Researcher Reflection

During the compilation of this dissertation, American higher education as we knew it has been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. Although acute disruptions to institutional operations and a rapid pivot toward remote learning and services took place in March of 2020, the impact of these shifts on colleges' solvency, students' persistence toward completion, transfer mobility, and economic conditions remains unclear. The fall semester of 2020 brought mainstream newspaper headlines and national dialogue about the "lost" generation of college students and those who did not show up in American colleges to begin another academic year (Long & Douglas, 2020). In October 2020, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted that

community colleges had suffered the largest enrollment losses of all institution types, defying the sector's longstanding correlative relationship between enrollment and economic downturn (Kelderman, 2020). The *Chronicle* cited the pandemic as a complex condition that challenged college access in whole new ways. Digital learning for both students and their children, loss of income, and fear of health implications were factors that, of course, impacted community-college enrollments disproportionately compared to universities (Kelderman, 2020; St. Amour, 2020). With more diverse and complex student lives comes greater impact in times of crisis. Now, access to higher education, and community colleges' roles in providing that access, is another reminder of the social contract Heelan and Mellow (2017) have described between this unique institution type and American society.

Inside Higher Ed published a comprehensive report, *Community College Students and the Pandemic*, which captures the exceptional work of community colleges during the coronavirus pandemic, but also shares the sobering news about enrollment drops and what they could mean for college access and completion in the years to come (St. Amour, 2020). As a leader and advocate in community-college student affairs, I could not help but recall a perspective included in the support literature for this current study: A lack of preparation to work in the institutional type that requires the most student-centered approaches will continue to reinforce equity gaps in American higher education (Latz et al., 2016).

Ematha, Hillary, Katy, Emily, and Isabella have found their voices as community-college student-affairs professionals, and their narratives reveal a passion and level of commitment to helping students navigate college that is exceptional, values driven, and genuine. At the beginning of their careers, these young professionals have a great deal of promise and capacity to influence the field of student affairs, and more broadly, higher education, throughout the next

several decades. Had their paths not crossed into community-college culture, however, would they know and be able to share their accounts of doing work that matters? To be sure, all educators deliver high impact to the lives of their students, regardless of context. But now, as we face the current crisis in American society, reeling from a pandemic that has forever changed the way we think about higher education, it seems an appropriate time for other passionate, promising, graduate students to find this spark, too. Community-college students need their commitment and expertise, and so do those for whom higher education was lost to them in the wake of the pandemic. These individuals, after all, are our future adult learners; likely coming to us later in life with complex lives, families, and economic challenges. We need strong student-affairs professionals, with big hearts and skillful critical thinking, to ensure that our systems are equitable, easy to navigate, and built through “labors of love,” as Ematha shared.

Community colleges remain, and will continue to remain, central to the American higher education system. While equity gaps still remain and community colleges have heavy burdens to carry when it comes to increasing completion rates, transfer mobility, and workforce entry, their doors remain the gateway for socioeconomic and educational mobility. To address the residual shortfalls of equity within our nation, and to do so in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, graduate schools must broaden the discourse, reverse the biases, and create opportunities for the best and brightest to come join our ranks. Future student-affairs professionals, we need you, and we welcome you to join us in doing the work that matters.

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APPENDIX A

Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: Stories of Transition Between Graduate Preparation and Community-College Student Affairs

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Sharon Anderson, PhD, Professor, School of Education, sharon.anderson@coloState.edu (970-491-6861) office (970-217-4228) cell

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Marisa Vernon White, candidate for the degree of PhD in Education and Higher Education Leadership, mvernon1@colostate.edu, 330-687-9236

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH? As a community-college practitioner, and also a graduate of a master's program in student affairs, I am interested in understanding the lived experiences of new professionals who have completed a graduate preparation program for student affairs (relevant programs are listed in the NASPA and ACPA program directories) and entered into student-affairs work in a community-college setting within 3 years of graduation.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY? The researcher for this study is Marisa Vernon White, candidate for the degree of PhD at Colorado State University. The principal investigator, Dr. Sharon Anderson, will be available for support in all phases of the study.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY? The purpose of this study is to understand how new community-college student-affairs professionals transition from their graduate preparation programs to the community-college environment. The primary method used to

collect data in this study is participant interviews, which provide stories, meaning-making processes, and insight into the lived experiences of the study's participants.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

This study is based in narrative inquiry, which is a research method that involves personal, individual interviews. After completing a brief introductory survey to ensure your experiences align with the parameters of the study, we will engage in at least one informal, semistructured interview, expected to last 60 to 90 minutes. This interview may be conducted in person, or via Zoom, a video/web conferencing platform. A second interview may be included if questions cannot be facilitated in full during the initial semistructured interview. Upon conclusion of our interview, you may be contacted for follow-up information or further dialogue, and offered an opportunity to review the analysis report and interpretation prior to finalization.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO? We will first discuss the information in this form and review your informational survey responses. During the interview, you will be asked to answer questions relating to your experiences of transitioning from your graduate program to a student-affairs position in within the community-college setting. The interviews will be informal, and you are encouraged to speak openly and honestly about your experiences. If we do not get through all questions in the first interview, a second, follow-up interview may be scheduled. At the conclusion of the interview, participants will receive information about the process and frameworks used to analyze their stories. In addition, participants will receive an analysis report, and be provided the opportunity to share insight into the analysis and interpretation prior to finalization.

ARE THERE REASONS I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw from this study at any time without consequence.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS? There are no known risks to participating in this study. There is minimal risk involved in this study. There is a potential risk for loss of confidentiality; however, the precautions listed above will be taken to lessen this risk and protect your identity during the study.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? Through better understanding the lived experiences of recent graduates of master's-level student-affairs programs who enter community-college student-affairs roles, we can begin to identify what factors supported their transition between these environments. Deepening our understanding of individuals' transition between these environments can illuminate gaps and also opportunities where further alignment, exposure, and preparation for community-college work can occur.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY? Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE? Protecting your personal story and experiences is important to me. Before we begin recording, I will ask you to identify pseudonyms for yourself and others you may refer to during your interview, and also ask that you avoid using your program or institution name. This is to ensure that your information is kept confidential even during the transcription process (software-based, voice-to-text transcription service, Rev). As the researcher, I will be the only access point for the data and will establish the password-protected, cloud-based system in which to keep your data set. The information on your

introductory survey form will be kept in a separate place (secondary password-protected drive) until the study and analysis is complete. At the conclusion of analysis, your identifying information will be destroyed. Personal or personally identifiable information will not be included in final report and publication.

Interview records and consent documents will be stored separately from each other. The same measures described above will be taken to protect confidentiality of this study data. I may be asked to share the research files with the Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes.

CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY? Participants may select to withdraw consent at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, data collected (informational survey, interview recordings, transcripts, and analysis) up until that point will be permanently destroyed and will not be included in the study.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary, and participants will not be compensated.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS? Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigators, Sharon Anderson at sharon.anderson@colostate.edu or Marisa Vernon White at mvernon1@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 970-491-1381, or e-mail RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu. I will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW? Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly signed this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document, containing 3 pages.

Participant's Name (please print)

Participant's Signature

Date

Co-PI Name (please print)

Co-PI Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

Participant Introductory Survey

Thank you for your interest in this study. This brief survey is designed to collect basic information about you as a participant and will be used to ensure that you meet the criteria for inclusion in this study. This information will also be used to introduce your profile as one of the participants in the study, along with data collected from your interview.

To protect your identity, please select a pseudonym that will be used in data collection and throughout the study.	
Did you complete a master's program specifically designed to prepare students for work in student affairs and/or higher education leadership?	Yes No
Is the program you completed listed on either the ACPA or NASPA graduate program directory? <i>If you are unsure, I can assist you in checking this.</i>	Yes No
When did you complete your master's program?	Month: Year:
When did you begin work in a community-college student-affairs role?	Month: Year:
How would you classify the primary functional area of your current role?	(a) Enrollment and financial services (b) Campus life/student development (c) Supporting academic functions
Is the college in which you work considered a community college (more than 50% of programs offered are associates degrees)	Yes No

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Stories of Transition

Between Graduate Preparation and Community-College Student Affairs

Participant Information:

Name:	Date:
Email:	Phone:

******Informed Consent Form and Introductory Study provided prior to this interview. Review and address any participant questions before proceeding******

Introduction to Interview:

Thank you for meeting with me and lending your experiences and stories to this research study.

The purpose of this study is to understand how new community-college student-affairs professionals transition from their graduate preparation programs and the community-college environment. I have prepared several questions to guide our discussion, but may also ask some clarifying or follow up questions throughout, and invite you to share additional personal stories related to the topic throughout our time together.

Throughout this interview, you will hear me ask questions about culture. By culture, I mean “networks of knowledge consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with people” (Hong, 2009, p. 4). As a subculture of higher education, I am specifically interested

in the shared language, values, and sense of solidarity of community colleges compared to the mainstream higher education culture, which is largely based in a dominant, four-year university culture. You can expect our time together to last about 60-90 minutes, at minimum, and a second interview may be scheduled if we do not get through all of the questions listed on this protocol. Our conversation will be recorded so our time together is conversational, and I may also take notes throughout our discussion.

As described in the Informed Consent Form we just reviewed, data collected today and in our future interactions, upon consent, will be

- Adjusted to use the pseudonyms you have selected for your name and other personally identifiable information you may share (before we begin recording).
- Stored in a password protected, cloud-based drive (Dropbox), separated from this form and your Introductory Survey Information
- Transcribed and reviewed at least three times, coded for themes and concepts
 - As a participant, you will be provided with the Data Analysis Overview sheet to explain the method used, at the conclusion of our time today
- Shared with you at the conclusion of the analysis to provide an opportunity for review, clarification, and accuracy
- Presented in a final dissertation and shared with you, as a participant, prior to publication

Once I begin to analyze the data collected today, I may reach back out to you for follow-up or to clarify certain points. Would you be open to this? Yes/ No

If so, how would you prefer that I reach out to you? Phone/ Email

Throughout our discussion, I encourage you to avoid using your name, institution(s), and other identifiable information. You may wish to use general terms like, “a large urban

university” or “the director over academic advising,” for example, rather than specific names.

This will aid in confidentiality as the audio recording is transcribed to text. Before we begin, let’s confirm the pseudonym you have selected for use in this study.

*****Discuss pseudonym selected by participant, as noted on Participant Information Survey*****

Ok, thank you. I will then use that pseudonym when we begin the recording.

Do you have any additional questions about the study or the interview structure before we get started?

*****Begin recording*****

Today is [DATE/TIME], and I am talking with [participant pseudonym]. I am going to be asking you some questions, and if there is anything you do not feel comfortable sharing, just let me know and we can move to the next.

1. Can you describe to me your personal higher education journey from undergraduate and through graduate school?
 - a. What do you recall led you to pursue a graduate program in student affairs?
 - b. From what experiences did you begin to learn about student affairs as a career?
 - c. What are some of the memories of learning and career exploration that first come to mind when you think about your time in graduate school?
 - d. Can you share a story about something you remember learning or experiencing in graduate school that you think about often in your current role?

2. Can you describe to me your personal connection to community colleges prior to accepting your current role?
3. Tell me a little about what you saw yourself doing after completing graduate school?
 - a. Does your current role align with what you originally thought you would be doing after graduate school? Why or why not?
 - b. During graduate school, what were your impressions of community colleges as a place to begin your career in student affairs?
4. Tell me about your current professional role in community-college student affairs.
 - a. From what sources did you learn about this opportunity?
 - b. What did you first think of this role when you learned about the opportunity?
 - c. Tell me more about your decision-making process and what factors you considered in accepting this role.
5. How do you tend to adapt when you enter a culture that is new to you? ?
 - a. What were some aspects of community-college culture that you noticed when you began in your role?
 - b. How did what you noticed relate to aspects of four-year universities?
 - c. In relationship to your role and transition into community-college culture, what did you do when you encountered ways of thinking that you felt unprepared to navigate?
6. Think back to your first few months in this role. Can you remember how you felt when you first entered community-college work?

- a. Describe for me the first thing you noticed about working in a community college?
- b. What are some of the unique ways of thinking, interacting with others, and other cultural aspects of community-college work?
- c. Share with me a time in which you encountered a conflict between something you learned/ experienced in graduate school vs how it may be different from working in a community college.

What else would you like to share with me about working in a community college and some of the observations you have had about, before we move into the next set of questions?

- 7. Who or what have been the most important supports for you in your transition into community-college work?
 - a. What has been the most helpful in learning and adjusting to community-college culture?
 - b. What, specifically, about who/what you shared has been most helpful to you?
- 8. In your opinion, what are some of the cultural differences someone new to a community-college student-affairs role may encounter compared to someone entering the dominant four-year culture of higher education?
 - a. Would you personally consider community-college work to be a subculture of the larger field? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you feel like a member of the community-college culture within the larger culture of higher education? Why or why not?
 - c. What have been some of the strategies you have used to adapt to:
 - i. Your professional role?

- ii. The specific community college in which you work.
 - iii. Community-college culture overall?
- 9. Last, can you share
 - a. A personal story that illustrates what working in a community college as a student affairs professional is like?
 - b. What you wish you would have known about working in a community college when you were in graduate school?
 - c. Is there anything else you think a graduate student in student affairs might want to know about
 - i. The easiest part of the transition?
 - ii. The hardest parts of the transition?

This concludes our discussion, and thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences with me today. If you have anything to add or have any questions for me after today, please reach out to me. My contact information is listed on the Introduction and Consent form we reviewed. Before leaving, I will also give/email you a copy of the analysis approach that will be used to further explore what you have shared with me today.

*****End recording*****

APPENDIX D

Data Analysis and Next Steps: An Overview for Participants

Thank you for participating in this study and sharing your stories and experiences with me. As a participant in this study, I am providing you with an overview of the frameworks and process used to explore and analyze your story. You may also wish to keep this document for reference, as you will be provided an opportunity to review my analysis report, and may provide input clarification on my interpretations of what you have shared.

Frameworks

Two specific, underlying assumptions provide the foundation from which this study has been designed. The first is that community-college work can be described as a “subculture” within the American higher education system. Subculture can be understood as collective identity created by shared jargon, language, norms, values, and community that the larger culture cannot or does not provide (Sebald, 1975). The second assumption is that the movement from graduate school to work in community-college student affairs can be understood as a “transition”. To understand transitions, Schlossberg’s (2011) 4S system can help identify four factors that support individuals throughout the experience: *situation*, *self*, *supports*, and *strategies*.

How the Data You Have Provided Will Be Analyzed

Now that we have concluded your interview, the recording will be transcribed using a web-based system known as Rev, which will convert our conversation to text for analysis. I will then go through the transcript three times, examining it in the following way:

Preliminary Read: Identifying broad storylines, quotes, and units of information to prepare for deeper analysis. This step is similar to “mapping” your overall story and experiences.

Read #1: This first round of analysis, I will be identifying data that reflect your personal emotions, attitudes, interpretations, and meaning-making throughout the experiences you shared with me. In this stage, I will be looking for themes and responses to your personal experiences.

Read #2: To explore relationship to the concept of “subculture”, the second analysis will be focused on identifying tensions or misalignments you may have described when comparing community colleges to your graduate experience or higher education as a whole.

Read #3: This analysis stage will utilize Schlossberg’s (2011) 4S system to identify elements of your story that reflect the *situation*, *self*, *supports*, and *strategies* factors that supported the transition and helped you adapt to the community-college environment.

Once these stages of analysis are complete, you will receive a copy of my analysis report and have an opportunity to review this work. I welcome your input at that time, as it will assist in clarifying or deepening my understanding of what you have shared with me today.

APPENDIX E

Sample Participant Analysis and Summary (for Participant Review): Emily

SUBCULTURE

PARTICIPANT	YES/ NO SUBCULTURE	NOTED MISALIGNMENTS/ DIFFERENCES
Emily	<p>YES—More student-focused, different ways of going about things, not as much time to prepare, things constantly changing</p> <p>(see comment in next column about university regionals and CCs)</p> <p>Subtle references to subculture: High learning curve when entering CC culture (but notes her personal values were far more aligned so this aided in overcoming it)</p> <p>“If we have dumb rules for the sake of having dumb rules, who is that benefitting? I’ve never understood it. I felt like I blended into the community-college culture in that aspect very well”</p> <p>Noted tendency to design Orientation the way she had seen it in dominant university environments</p> <p>“particularly at a community college” (talking about SA impact on students)</p> <p>“completely different way of thinking” (interacting with people, questions to ask, etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In grad school, viewed higher education as full of red tape and bureaucratic; this is not the case in community colleges where goals and actions change nearly weekly and drive those working within the culture to exert much more flexibility and agility • Notes community colleges are an environment where students need committed and passionate individuals to work • Draws parallel between the way a university views its regional campus (“main” campus) and how community colleges are defined in relationship to the dominant (“main”) culture • Notices a misalignment between assumptions about why students pursue college and why CC students do (unemployment, less confidence, transfer, certificates, etc.); challenged her to adapt her approach when designing onboarding experiences • Felt pull toward community-college SA work, but could not find FT positions and her situational factors led her to turn toward university employment • Toward end of graduate school, noticed community-college SA roles posted were far broader than university ones, which were centered on 1-2 functional areas • Found ways to adapt standard practices, like Orientation, for the needs of students based on her personal experiences and also trial/error while supported by a supervisor who helped course-correct when needed (had to “rethink about how you would put things together”) • Misalignment between SA professionals’ deep value in education vs the realities of CC student needs and views of college (college = means to end) • Observed differences in what diverse institutional types can provide to students (purpose of the institution) • Misalignment between student-development theories and how to support and interact with students in the CC environment (truncating “dream” conversations for more practical problem solving with students)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing the needs of multiple stakeholders/“scattered” focus that includes serving students, community, K-12, etc. • No “one” demographic or even degree-level goal • High holistic SA work, everything from basic needs to academic planning to financial aid • Describable difference in CC when it comes to student-centeredness and alignment to this as a core value • High awareness of systemic barriers (and willingness to adjust them) that support or hinder students from progressing • Selectivity vs open enrollment inherently builds a different approach to policies, procedures, practices . . . fundamentally designed to open as opposed to exclude • Conflict between her own educational goals (PhD) and community-college culture/environment • So many pathways and diversity in offerings (cert., degree, transfer, workforce preparation) clutter student choice, creating unique complexities for basic and foundational SA interactions (for which SA grads are trained) like advising, onboarding, and financial aid • “Hard to switch your brain about who your students are”
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4S TRANSITIONS

PARTICIPANT	PRIMARY/ EMERGENT	Situation	Support	Self	Strategy
Emily	Strategy, as derived from previous experiences in open-enrollment institutions, understanding of higher education as multifaceted	<p>Graduate assistantship at regional campus in rural setting helped her feel at home and adjust to open-access environment</p> <p>Graduate assistantship fair was first salient realization there are multiple facets to SA work and institutional types</p>	<p>Reliable supervisor who had been in the CC for a few years and guided her thinking when program design did not align with institutional mission, pointed out barriers that might stand in the way of applying a more standard design from</p>	<p>Identified college access as a focus area for her career in SA, based in her own personal challenges in transitioning to college</p> <p>Contributing to orientation as an undergrad made her feel so “engaged and ignited” (personal passion/value</p>	<p>Using what she learned in grad school about institutional type, adopted a flexible mindset from the start (both as GA and in a CC)</p> <p>Makes meaning of higher education and SA as a multidisciplinary field. Wanted a grad program that also helped her use and</p>

		<p>Upon graduating, was not able to pursue CC employment due to most positions being PT. Situational factor in her job search (finances). Felt pull toward the work, but could not enter.</p> <p>Unhappiness in her first professional role supported a geographically prioritized search, resulting in CC employment (FT)</p>	<p>university SA culture to something like Orientation</p> <p>Supervisor who allowed both initial design/creativity but helped refine it for the culture and student body</p> <p>Small moments with students that illustrate to her she is having an impact</p>	<p>for helping others transition to college)</p> <p>High level of personal commitment to helping others (passion)</p> <p>Has a lot of self-described interests across broad areas, including science/ math/ data . . . self-described “hodge podge”</p> <p>Drew upon personal values, interests, and qualities she knows she possessed in order to make the transition</p> <p>Felt like she needed to do something that mattered, which was central to her work</p> <p>Enters new environments as an observer, taking in new information before acting (believes this was an asset to her during transition)</p> <p>Saw her values in action</p> <p>High service tendency/goes above and beyond for students helped</p>	<p>understand data to help her navigate environments</p> <p>Applied her formal graduate school content about institutional type to interpret her role, which was broad and she was unable to fully define</p> <p>Found ways to adapt standard practices, like Orientation, for the needs of students based on her personal experiences</p> <p>Identified those within the environment who could help guide how to “backward design” her work for CC populations</p> <p>Moved away from the developmental strategies/ student development theories she had learned and toward a more pragmatic approach to working with students</p> <p>Applies creativity when faced with seemingly impossible expectations and outcomes</p>
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				<p>her navigate misalignment</p> <p>Intrinsic helping attitude</p>	<p>Focuses on student needs when faced with a dilemma or conflicting information and exerts flexibility to make the necessary adjustment to serve their personal need</p> <p>Applied a strategy to overcome a disconnect she observed (her desire for a PhD and CC access to one) by moving to a university, but intending to circle back to have impact on CCs later in her career</p> <p>Trying to find ways to simplify so many CC options, choices, and pathways when working with students.</p> <p>Acknowledges CC professionals may need to do more work and/or trial and error in testing ideas that come from higher ed/ SA's dominant culture (high awareness of this)</p>
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STORY SUMMARY (FOR CHAPTER 4)

Emily: A Regional Campus Experience Ignites a Spark

Emily's path to community-college student affairs began with a passion for education and was ignited further by her graduate-assistantship placement at a regional campus of a large, research university. Although Emily's undergraduate experience was residential, liberal-arts focused, and at private institution in her state's capital city, her own rocky transition to a campus community helped her identify the challenges students are likely to face when they enter college. Growing up in a small, rural town she described as "the middle of nowhere," Emily noted the jarring realities she faced when transitioning to a college campus in an urban area. It was this culture clash and difficult beginning to her college experience that led Emily to become an Orientation leader during her third year at the university, opening up a pathway to consider student affairs as her future profession.

Upon completion of her undergraduate degree in education, Emily did not necessarily have her eyes set on graduate studies. However, as she searched employment opportunities, she experienced a pull towards positions connected to colleges and universities, and she determined she may need to pursue a master's degree to land an opportunity that would fulfill her desire to directly help others access and transition into college. This realization led her to apply to a graduate program in higher education leadership at a university several hours away. Emily specifically reflected on the graduate-assistantship interview experience the program facilitated for incoming students, which introduced her to just how broad and diverse student-affairs work can be. One year after completion of her bachelor's degree, Emily found herself working as a student-services graduate assistant at a regional campus of the university, and beginning her graduate coursework.

Emily described her graduate assistantship as the experience that "engaged and ignited"

her, sharing “that is where the ‘aha’ moments happened” and she “fell in love with college access.” The rural setting of the regional campus was a familiar environment for Emily to gain experiences working on college-access programs, where she helped local high-school students and adults consider what a college pathway might bring to their lives and future. As a support to the campus in a student-services assistantship, she described helping families navigate higher education terminology, financial aid, and making connections between the community, employers, local schools, and the campus.

In addition, Emily also specifically drew parallels between the regional campus work and what she learned in her graduate courses about what working in different types of institutions, including community colleges, might be like. Under the leadership of a supervisor who fulfilled multiple student-service roles at the small, rural, regional campus, Emily described her first observations of the demands of regional campus and community-college work: “At a community college, you end up doing it all. Particularly if you are good at what you do, you do everything. She [supervisor] always had to balance a lot of things.” Emily affectionately referred to this first introduction to broad job responsibilities later in the interview when we specifically discussed her professional work in a community-college setting.

This experiential component, in the form of her assistantship, was also complimented by what Emily described as broad assistantship and practicum locations of her peers, which added diversity of perspective to her program’s class discussions and curriculum. When asked about how community-college topics were woven into her graduate-program experience, Emily spoke positively about her program’s intentional efforts to place graduate students in different institutions around the region, bring diverse institutional experiences into the classroom, and illuminate organizational and mission-related aspects of public, private, for-profit, community

college, regional campus, professional school, and other organizational types of higher education.

Specifically, discussions about community colleges resonated with Emily because they seemed to parallel what she was experiencing at her regional-campus assistantship: “We talked about how community colleges have to be more responsive to their community because often they are the bridge between the community needs and what skills and certifications are needed to actually get there [to fill community needs]”. Emily, laughing, shared an example of how community influenced the work of her graduate assistantship, recalling a request to quickly create a highly engaging, fun, week-long program to introduce local eighth-graders to the world of insurance, in partnership with local insurance business. Remembering how she struggled to fulfill the expectations of the students, school, community, employer, and her supervisor, she described this as her first experiences in thinking creatively and flexibly to meet community demands. She also attributed this experience to the development of her personal strategy to facilitating complex community-college student-affairs work because it nudged her to think creatively about how to meet expectations she jokingly described to her supervisor as “not having a realistic outcome.”

Although Emily’s passion for college access and her graduate-school experiences sparked interest in entering community-college work, she found entry into the 2-year sector to be more difficult than she had anticipated:

As much as I was interested in community colleges, I found it hard to see myself there, just because of the financial limitations of a part-time job. I felt like there were a lot of part-time jobs, a lot of entry-level jobs that maybe didn’t require a master’s degree.

Disappointed by the lack of full-time opportunities at community colleges during her job search, Emily accepted a position as a student-services generalist in the One-Stop center at a large,

flagship university within the state. As she learned her role and the comprehensive financial-aid, enrollment, student-records, and admissions functions the One-Stop provided, she began to feel a sense of misalignment between the interest in college access she had developed during her graduate assistantship and the work she was performing at the university. She described one moment that helped her realize a change was needed:

There was a \$100 acceptance fee you [accepted students] had to pay within 2 weeks [of] when they got accepted to the university. There would be students that would have earned full-ride scholarships once they were in the institution, but because they could not pay the \$100 acceptance fee and there was no grant or loan or anything for that, they could not come. It was just, like, “Well, if they cannot pay, there are 60 other students [on the waitlist] who will.”

Emily contrasted this experience within the university One-Stop with her graduate-school experiences, where she had come to know that other types of institutions may exert more flexibility or, as she stated, “bend over backwards to try to make sure that we [student services] could help students every step of the way.” After 6 months in her first professional student-affairs role, Emily began a second job search. Focused within the region, geographic limitations brought forward only two available opportunities: one in financial aid at her small, private undergraduate institution, and a general student-services role geared toward supporting incoming students at the local community college.

Considering the two opportunities, Emily had already previously decided financial aid was a functional area in which she did not want to focus as a primary role. However, she described the community-college opportunity as

A sigh of relief because it felt so student-focused. Everything [about it] was about “How is this supporting or hurting students? How can we help them work around barriers?”—that kind of stuff. It was a breath of fresh air to be able to actually put so much emphasis on student success because every institution talks about how they support student success and diversity and all that other stuff . . . but not all of them have a great way of how it actually works [put] into their mission. I felt like every

place I turned at [the community college to which she had applied], I was seeing things actually put into action for that.

Emily was offered the position and entered community-college student affairs, as a full-time employee this time, after her brief stint in the university One-Stop. In the new role, she was one of four new hires to the institution, each of whom were hired to form a team and design a sustainable orientation program to meet the many populations the community college served. Under the leadership of another supportive supervisor, Emily shared she had to learn to “rethink” what the functional area of orientation programming looks like in different institutions, and drew upon her undergraduate education degree to apply “backwards design” principles to accommodate the needs of students who did not fit what is widely thought to be a college student profile. Emily described trying to find a balance between her own values and professional training related to education, especially working with adults who had been let go from the decades’ long work or felt forced to turn to the college as their only hope for a future. Poignantly, Emily reflected on this contrast:

To us [student-affairs professionals], we all see “Look at all the different possibilities you can do with this degree or with this class or whatever experience it is,” but I also had to learn how to convince some other people to buy into that dream, too, because not everyone loves higher ed as much as we all do. I saw that particularly at the community-college level because if you’re not all that invested in it [education] . . . you’re going to start someplace that feels a bit more accessible and go from there.

Emily also shared her interest in and fondness for student-development theory as foundational to student-affairs work, but she specifically shared that working in a community college challenged her to think about its application. To Emily, the notion of subculture resonated: “How they [community colleges] think about things, however they go about doing things, is all different than a more traditional institution.” Distinct interpretations of her experience of community-college culture included more observable student-focused practice,

time constraints when working in a rapidly fluctuating college setting, last-minute preparation, and a high degree of flexibility and helpfulness when working with students. She also noted that, while trying to meet a highly diverse set of student needs, she had to learn quickly how to creatively acquire resources without passing costs onto students—a common financial-management strategy that she recalls was sometimes used in the other types of institutions she learned about.

Despite her passion for the work, Emily's 14-month experience working professionally in a community college recently came to a close as the result of her decision to follow her partner to a different region of the state. Based primarily on personal circumstances, she accepted a role working with graduate students at a 4-year university in the area to which they relocated, and she was viewing this shift as an opportunity to take advantage of access to the university's PhD program. Emily added, "This is an opportunity I could not access working at the community college." Emily's long-term career plans include earning her doctorate degree, engaging in education-related research, and partnering with community colleges through the development of her own nonprofit organization one day.

In closing her narrative, Emily took a few more moments to share an experience she described as "the epitome of community-college student affairs." With a knowing smile, I intently listened as she described a lengthy and complete interaction with a student and his mother during the college's orientation program. Her description led me through a weaving path of bureaucratic policies and decision-making regarding financial-aid options, reviewing multiple credential levels within the same discipline, predicting how the students' academic plans would transfer to as many universities as possible several years into the future, and explaining the difference between applied associate's degrees and those designed to fulfill general education

requirements. The jargon she uses is familiar (“dev-ed,” “applied,” “transfer,” “traditional,” “direct from high school”), terms that are central to initial intake advising in many community-college settings. She looks at me from the Zoom screen, after describing her experience for several minutes, pauses, smiles, and closes with “It’s just hard to switch your brain [from] who you think your students are . . . then also just how programs, finances work . . . you have to change how you’re thinking about it, how you’re interacting with people, what questions you’re asking, and where you are coming from.”