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Motivations For Student Affairs Professionals Accepting An Interim Role During The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Study

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MOTIVATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS ACCEPTING AN INTERIM ROLE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A NARRATIVE STUDY

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Dedication

To my family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and faculty at William & Mary this dissertation is dedicated to you for never giving up on me and for giving me hope, inspiration, and guidance.

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There are three distinct groups of people I need to thank, acknowledge, and recognize for making all this possible.

To my humble group of participants, thank you for stepping into the spotlight to share your heartfelt stories with me. Some of you smiled and laughed while telling your stories. Oftentimes, after our interview ended, I thought about what you said and smiled, too. Others of you cried while recounting experiences from your interim role that made you angry, upset, sad, and hurt. I am sorry you had to experience those emotions again while talking with me. Afterwards, I often cried, too. I teared up while writing that just now. I know what you went through, not in the same way or to the same degree, but I know. Thank you for being vulnerable with me. It was a pleasure to meet you, to listen to you, and to retell your stories in this dissertation.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to higher education institutions, especially for staffing. Internal interim appointments were used to fill gaps in the administrative ranks. Literature emphasizes that interim leaders often serve during periods of uncertainty, crisis, and change. The purpose of this study was to explore the motivation(s) for why administrators within student affairs decided to accept an interim leadership role during the COVID-19 pandemic and to better understand their experience. For this narrative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven student-affairs practitioners who were asked by their supervisors to serve in an interim dean, director, or vice-president role between March 2020–May 2022. An inductive analysis approach was employed to derive patterns and themes between the interims and their experiences. The findings indicated that all participants felt that their financial compensation for the role was inadequate given the demands of the interim role. Additionally, despite all but one of the participants constantly feeling overwhelmed and stressed, most indicated a willingness to do an interim role again. McClelland's (1961) Achievement Motivation Theory was used as a framework to see if the factors of achievement, affiliation, or power were primary motivators for accepting the interim role. Over half of the interims indicated they were motivated by achievement. Additionally, the concept of being motivated by power was not viewed positively by most of the participants, yet power did emerge as a motivator for one participant. Given that interim appointments and pandemics are both temporary, conducting a study that focused on experiences during this timeframe adds to the limited body of research on this intersectionality. Additionally, narratives from the participants serve as a guide for future practitioners considering an interim appointment or supervisors looking for an interim employee.

MOTIVATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS ACCEPTING AN INTERIM ROLE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A NARRATIVE STUDY

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to higher education institutions. Many of these challenges were financial in nature, stemming from lost tuition dollars due to declines in enrollment (Smalley, 2020). According to a report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Sedmack, 2020), freshman enrollment declined in the fall of 2020 by a staggered 13.1% at 3,600 participating American colleges/universities. This loss of students attending college ultimately led to an overall post-secondary decline of 2.5%. The reduction in enrolled students and subsequent tuition dollars lost led to unexpected operating costs pertaining to online instruction and support, uncertain budgets, and hiring freezes for vacant positions (Flaherty, 2020). With no new employees entering organizations during the pandemic, institutions implemented various reforms to preserve core functions and reduce spending. These reforms included new methods of curriculum instruction, employee workstyles, and the increased use of internal interim appointments to fill gaps in the administrative ranks (Robinson & Maitra, 2020). While the literature on interim leadership is rather limited, what is available emphasizes that interim leaders often serve during periods of uncertainty, crisis, and change (Browning & McNamee, 2012; Farrell, 2016; Gee et al., 2010). These periods of crisis and change can be sudden and unexpected, or anticipated and planned (Browning & McNamee, 2012; Dalton & Gardner, 2002; Mundt, 2004).

On an organizational level, periods of crisis are often met with feelings of uncertainty (Flaherty, 2020). At an individual level, interim leaders serving during times of crisis can be seen

as mere placeholders, seat-warmers, and caretakers (Browning & Boys, 2015; Browning & McNamee, 2012) or as a stepping-stone for advancement and opportunity (Farrell, 2016; Mundt, 2004). Despite the uncertainty and chaos associated with interim appointments, it remains unknown what motivates an employee to step into the spotlight and assume an interim role during a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. I attempted to answer this question.

Statement of the Problem

An interim administrator is often seen as an invisible, hidden actor in the department (Browning & Boys, 2015; Farquhar, 1995; Mundt, 2004), which raises the question of what motivates a leader to accept this role. Three key reasons support the need for further study of interim leadership in times of crisis.

First, interim administrators provide vital leadership during times of uncertainty and change. Without knowing when a crisis will emerge or how long an institution will be in a state of crisis, it is important to study administrators who are or have served in these roles to gain a greater understanding of their experiences and their motivations for why they accepted an interim role. Knowing more about these motivations can provide practitioners who are responsible for recruiting, hiring, training, supervising, and evaluating interim employees the knowledge to prepare new administrators for the next planned or unplanned crisis in which interim appointments may be necessary.

The second reason to study this topic is to dispel countless assumptions associated with interim leadership roles. One assumption common to those who take on a temporary leadership role is that definitions for interim, acting, interregnum, and so forth. are uniform and consistent across institutions. There is no consensus about definitions for each of the individual terms and despite seeing vast differences in the literature, many researchers use the range of terms

interchangeably (Farrell, 2016). Another assumption or misconception is that interim leaders are seat-warmers who have little to no power or decision-making authority (Machtig, 2020). The amount of power and authority an interim leader possesses depends on the expectations set forth by the search committee, hiring entity, and/or supervisor. Finally, a third uninformed assumption regarding interim leadership is that after the individuals complete their interim role, they leave the institution. Most interims stay at their institution after an interim appointment (Farquhar, 1995).

The third reason for the need to study interim leadership in times of crisis pertains to the limited and somewhat dated body of literature surrounding this topic (Browning & McNamee, 2012; Farquhar, 1991; Farrell, 2016). Browning and McNamee (2012) and Mundt (2004) asserted that interim positions, especially internally filled roles, are largely unstudied and ignored. Since the time of their research a decade or more ago, scant additional studies have been conducted. Moreover, any kind of literature specific to Student Affairs interim leadership is even more limited. Lastly, literature about periods of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic is, as of March 2024, still somewhat limited. Thus, a major contributing factor and motivator for the study was to contribute to the body of literature related to the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education, specifically within Student Affairs.

Statement of the Purpose

The purposes of this study were to advance the current body of literature surrounding the experiences of administrators who accepted an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to explore the motivation(s) for why they accepted the role. The window to study this phenomenon was limited since periods of crisis and interim leadership are both temporary. This study focused on interim leaders hired between March 2020 and May 2022. Some of their

interim services extended into 2023, and as of March 2024, one participant in my study is still in their interim role.

Research Questions

In this narrative study, I gathered qualitative data about interim leaders who have or are currently still serving in an interim role during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions focused on gathering stories on the experiences of interim leaders serving during periods of crisis, as well as exploring the motivation(s) for why they accepted the role:

1) What are the narrative stories from Student Affairs leaders who served in an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2) What motivated individuals to accept an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Summary

Current literature about interim leadership is outdated. There is even less research when looking specifically at student affairs administrators serving in interim roles, and student affairs administrators providing crisis leadership in an interim role during a time of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Definitions of what constitutes an interim, acting, or temporary leader are inconsistent within the literature and are even used interchangeably (Farrell, 2016, p. 991). There are several factors that may motivate an individual to accept an interim role such as achievement and accomplishment (Ganta, 2014, p. 222). Thus, inconsistent definitions, coupled with gaps in current literature create an opportunity to add more research to the field by studying the motivations for why student affairs administrators accepted an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods Summary

Using narrative inquiry, I attempted to understand the motivations for why student affairs administrators accepted an interim role during the pandemic. This method involved interviewing solicited participants to obtain their stories and experiences. Data generation included semi-structured interviews and artifact collection. I used McClelland's (1961) Human Motivation Theory for the research framework. This theory looked at the concepts of achievement, power, and affiliation as motivators for behavior. Participant data was analyzed and coded thematically. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation and member-checking.

Definition of Terms

Despite the lack of research about interim leadership, most of the current body of literature does a lackluster job of consistently defining this type of employment. As indicated with some of the assumptions associated with this type of temporary employment, the range of position descriptors for individuals temporarily filling roles use terms such as interim, acting, temporary, discontinuous, and short-term leadership interchangeably. This lack of clarity can quickly lead to confusion and inconsistencies, especially if the interim is an internal employee or an external hire. Examples of the inconsistent definitions are listed below for context.

Acting

There are many definitions within the current literature of what constitutes an acting leader. One definition is that an acting leader is an emergency fill-in who carries on day-to-day executive operations (Farquhar, 1995). Another states that an acting leader fills a post, but only because the permanent appointee is unavailable due to extended travel, illness, or other extenuating circumstances (Gee et al., 2010). The clearest definition pertaining to what happens to the individual after their acting role comes from MacAyeal (2017) who states that individuals

in an acting role are already employed by the college or university and will continue to be employed by the same institution once the acting assignment has concluded.

Interim

Definitions for what constitutes an interim employee were easier to find compared to acting employees. For example, the most consistent definition of an interim is that it is a form of temporary leadership by an internal employee, for a certain time period (Birasnav et al., 2010; Mundt, 2004; Weingart, 2003). Another definition states the exact opposite saying that an interim leader is a quickly appointed employee from outside the organization who serves during prolonged or complicated transition (Farquhar, 1995). Browning and McNamee (2012) argued that an interim is a temporary employee who serves during volatile periods of transition. Some definitions are vague, simply stating that an interim is someone fills a vacant post on a permanent level (Gee et al., 2010), while others, like that from Alley (2005) proposes that an interim is a transition leader who has power and functioning in the usual manner as of a permanent employee.

Miscellaneous Terms

A review of the literature also yielded several other definitions and descriptors for a temporary leader. One example, as previously mentioned, was the word *internal*, which is a vacancy filled by an employee already working at the institution (MacAyeal, 2017). The concept of an interregnum from Farquhar (1995) involves the component of time with its use and application. The length of time that a position is vacant and the period in which functions are suspended serves to bring a time component into this definition. Lastly, the concept of what defines a vacancy was elaborated upon by (van Ours & Ridder, 1992) who stated that it was a slot that an employer would like to fill immediately.

For the purposes of this study, an interim administrator is defined as an internal employee who is currently working at their institution in a position that is not their permanent role. This internal employee must have assumed a temporary leadership role during the COVID-19 pandemic which started and/or ended between March 2020 through May 2022.

Chapter Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic created a litany of problems in higher education. Decreased enrollments resulted in fewer tuition dollars. Less funds for staffing meant that many searches for faculty, staff, and other administrators were put on hold, thus resulting in the increased use of interim employees from within the institution. Prior research surrounding interim leadership indicates individuals serving in temporary roles are often seen as placeholders, and that definitions for interim leadership are inconsistent. The purpose of this research was to obtain stories of student affairs administrators who began serving in an interim role between March 2020 through May 2022 and examine the motivation(s) for why they accepted the role.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

What are the experiences of interim administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic? What motivates individuals to accept an interim role in times of crisis? Do you think an interim has ever thought to themselves, "Why was I asked to lead?" These are all questions that can be asked to those serving in interim positions during the COVID-19 crisis to understand better what motivated them to say "yes" to the interim opportunity. These questions matter because the body of literature pertaining to interim leadership during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic is limited. The following sections will provide context about the state of crisis higher education as a sector was in due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, different types of interim leadership will be defined and contextualized. This section will also include sets of skills and traits needed for different types of interim leaders. Lastly, this will be followed up with literature about interim leaders in student affairs and the concept of crisis leadership within student affairs.

Higher Education in Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a crisis in higher education, but this is not first instance colleges and universities have needed to respond and adapt to a pandemic. The Influenza "Spanish Flu" Outbreak of 1918 forced many institutions to completely close and slowly resume services (e.g., housing, intercollegiate activities) over an extended period of time that depended on their location (Thomas & Foster, 2020). The Coronavirus disease, which according to the Center for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) first originated in Wuhan, China, in December of 2019 touched every corner of the world and every industry including education. As of the spring of 2022, the United States alone had recorded over 83 million cases and a million

deaths (CDC, 2022). Higher education institutions had to quickly adjust and adapt to new methods of curriculum, instruction, workstyles, and general day-to-day operations including cleaning/sanitation.

In normal work environments and conditions, we strive to keep busy with work that is meaningful, but in times of crisis, work is uncertain, unpredictable, and stressful (Browning & McNamee, 2012; Farquhar, 1995; Farrell, 2016; Gee et al., 2010). Farrell (2018) found that taking on an interim role can be both physically and emotionally exhausting. During a crisis, rest is affected by the constant worry of employment and leadership responsibilities, and as individuals' basic needs are threatened motivation to excel may suffer. People strive to be in environments that are safe, predictable, and reliable (Maslow, 1943). Being in a state of crisis, no matter how temporary, directly conflicts with this need and presents an obvious and immediate threat to one's safety. Recently, Lederman (2022) provided a narrative from Kevin McClure, an associate professor of higher education at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington regarding how the pandemic impacted morale within higher education. Feelings of burnout and disengagement added to the "big quit" of faculty, staff, and administrators leaving their positions within higher education (Lederman, 2022, p. 1). For personal safety, while measures such as masks, distancing, and vaccines helped to reduce the spread of the virus, institutions saw alarming declines in enrollment rates, especially among international students (Robinson & Maitra, 2020). As a result, fewer students meant fewer tuition dollars and revenue which impacted the financial safety of colleges and universities. From an employment standpoint, uncertain budgets and unexpected costs resulted in frozen or postponed searches for faculty and staff (Flaherty, 2020; Machtig, 2020; Smalley, 2020) as well as current employees facing fears of being reassigned, furloughed, or terminated.

The financial loss due to the pandemic impacted current employees at institutions who faced constant fears regarding their employment status (Flaherty, 2020). With budgets frozen, new employee searches were put on hold, thus forcing institutions to adjust day-to-day operations with less resources such as money and personnel (Flaherty, 2020; Robinson & Maitra, 2020). Employees were experiencing more stress and uncertainty during this pandemic (Lederman, 2022), and, as a result, those in interim leadership dealt with not only their new responsibilities but also the stressors of the pandemic.

Types of Temporary Leaders

The current body of literature pertaining to interim leadership within the context of higher education is small (Browning & Boys, 2015; Browning & McNamee, 2012; Farquhar, 1995). Some of the literature states that interim roles are often seen as hidden and invisible within the organization (Browning & Boys, 2015; Farquhar, 1995; Mundt, 2004). Additional research by Sutherland (2017) states that "crisis response" research, which focuses on decisions pertaining to resource allocation (for how to handle the crisis) is sparse (p. 3). Still, a review of the literature about the use of interim leaders during times of crisis yielded some concerning assumptions about how terms are defined. As previously indicated, there are vast differences in the operational definitions of interim versus acting leaders. These concepts will be explored and contextualized for the purposes of this study. Additionally, the various types of interim leaders (Caretakers, Seat-Warmers, Transitioner, etc.) will be explained.

Interim vs. Acting

There are countless assumptions associated with who is an interim leader, where they come from, and what they do. Some may assume that interims can only be internal employees, while others think that once a permanent replacement is found that the interim leader must

resign/leave the organization. These assumptions are further compounded by inconsistent definitions of interim vs. acting appointments, and the interchangeable use of terms.

Interim. Some consistency exists regarding the definitions for interim leadership that were used for this study. I drew upon three different pieces of literature to form the definition for interim leadership for this study. First, London (2020) stated that appointing an interim may be something as simple as a "stop-gap measure" that requires a quick decision rather than a complicated hiring process (p. 1). Depending on the amount of time an organization has to find an interim leader, this faster process for hiring seems most advantageous. An interim can simply be appointed for a period of time by a manager who has faith and confidence in the appointee to fulfill the duties and expectations associated with the interim role. Gee et al. (2010) offer two more supportive caveats that are important for distinguishing interim versus acting. First, interim appointments are for a "significant" role that provide vital leadership and decision-making during times of change (p. 32). For example, the role of a director, manager, or superintendent falls into this category. Second, the interim appointee assumes the role with an uncertain end date. Numerous outside factors can influence and affect the duration of a temporary appointment. Finally, Weingart (2003) asserted that interim leaders are internal employees. Thus, for the purposes of this study, an interim leader was defined as an internal employee currently working at their institution who assumes a temporary leadership role for an unspecified amount of time.

Acting. There is no consensus on the definitions of acting and interim; thus, some criteria for acting are the same for interim. For comparison and reference, I briefly contextualize the criterion for acting leadership in comparison to interim leadership. For example, Gee et al. (2010) argued that those in acting leadership roles only include internal employees since they are responsible for carrying out the exact duties of the person they are replacing for a short period of

time. Examples of this would include an illness or extended travel for the person typically holding the role. Lastly, although interims provide more leadership and decision-making in their role, Farquhar (1995) stated that acting leaders tend to carry on day-to-day operations in the short term.

With interim and acting leadership being more clearly defined and contextualized, especially for the purposes of this study, different types of interim leaders must now be examined. Depending on the needs of the organization (including the specific department and its personnel), the length of time of the interim appointment, and the goals of the organization during the crisis the interim may be expected to be a certain "type" of leader. Several areas of literature extensively described what factors interims should weigh when considering whether to take on an interim role.

Types of Interim Leaders

The duties and responsibilities of interim leaders can vary considerably depending on the needs of the organization and the duration of the interim appointment. Some interims assume their roles rather quickly and are appointed by a supervisor or manager. Conversely, when an organization expects, anticipates, and plans for an interim to take on the role there is more time to prepare and flush out details related to expectations, duties, and timeline. The explanation of these roles is salient given that periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can occur suddenly and organizational needs can shift unexpectedly. With so much uncertainty happening around interim leaders, it becomes important for these individuals to know and understand the scope of the duties and expectations for the interim role as these details may affect whether the person accepts or declines an offer to take on an interim role. Some of the more popular roles mentioned in the literature are defined and contextualized below.

Lame-Duck/Seat-Warmer. Machtig (2020) and Farquhar (1995) refer to an interim with little to no authority and decision making as a "seat-warmer" (p. 1) and "lame-duck" (p. 56) respectively. Though the term lame-duck is most often associated with politics; this type of interim leader can be seen in higher education. One example involves Stanford president, Donald Kennedy circa 1991. Kennedy resigned before a Congressional investigation and remained in his role for a little over a year (Farquhar, 1995). During this time, Kennedy was a lame-duck with respect to making any substantial decisions or proposing any university changes. With minimal attention from administrators, a "who-cares" attitude is bestowed upon this interim who is usually in a very term limited role (Farquhar, 1995, p. 56).

Caretaker. Another type of interim leadership mentioned in the literature is that of the caretaker (Browning & Boys, 2015; Farquhar, 1995). This type of passive leadership is seen as less authoritative and prestigious compared to someone in a permanent role (Browning & McNamee, 2012; Farquhar, 1995). In a study by Browning and Boys (2015), caretakers did not have much if any credibility within the organization, and their focus was to foster organizational stability until their successor was named. Their role was to "keep the trains running" by maintaining the standards, direction, and initiatives currently in place (London, 2020, p. 2).

Healer. Remembering that interims already serve during times of uncertainty and change, the added factor of how their predecessor left can be an additional minefield to navigate. Did the departure of the predecessor create the crisis? Did the crisis induce the departure? Depending on the tenure of their predecessor and how well they managed the department, the interim leader may take on the role of a healer which according to Gee et al. (2010) attempts to manage conflicts currently in place within the department and organization. One of the obvious benefits of being an internal interim is that these individuals may already be aware of the

workplace dynamics of the organization prior to beginning their role. An external hire, often referred to as an "outsider" or even a "guest" (Browning & McNamee, 2012, p. 731) would not have the same context. Farquhar (1995) added that healers may perform major repairs and take substantial steps toward readying the organization for a successor.

Change Agent. While the Caretaker tends to limit their decision-making, the change agent does the opposite. If an organization is stagnant, apathetic, and in general need of swift decision-making, a change-agent interim leader may be needed. Just as with the healer, the benefit of employing an internal interim is that the administration has confidence in their ability to seamlessly transition to the role, or at least adapt to the role in an expedited manner to begin moving the organization forward (Gee et al., 2010). The difference between the healer and change agent is that healers need to spend more time focusing on the human-dynamic within the organization. The fact that the change agent interim is internal may present challenges as well given the politics of the campus and the fact that some of the changes may negatively affect colleagues, which may make it difficult to return to a prior position as relationships may have changed.

Groomer. While not used too frequently, one type of interim leadership that is probably the safest and offers the least amount of risk is that of the groomer. This type of interim prepares a person to become a successor in the position. In this case, the interim is most likely an internal employee who is currently performing a job they held in the past (Mooney et al., 2013). While similar to a seat-warmer role, the groomer's prior experience means that little training is required for them to help onboard a new employee. Here, the interim can (if necessary), be given great amounts of autonomy compared to other types of interims. They will also be able to groom their

successor by providing informed training and resources based on their prior experience in the position.

Contender. The smallest and potentially riskiest type of interim is the contender. Coined by Mooney et al. (2013) as the person who will likely transition from the interim role into the permanent role, the timing of the transition is essential. The contender must prove that they are the best fit for the job. Interim academic deans, as referenced in Machtig (2020) represent one such example. This type of interim may not have a long period of time to make the best impression, so it is imperative that this type of interim build a supportive network through exposure to important players within the organization. One factor to consider with this type of transition pertains to how the interim moves into the permanent role. A search process could fail, or maybe the interim is simply told that they are taking over the role permanently. Equally, the contender may not be the person hired for the permanent position.

Transitioner. Though the literature did not specifically identify a type of interim called a "transitioner," the eventual act of transitioning out of the role is something that interims must prepare for. This component, briefly mentioned in the healer category by Gee et al. (2010) is a necessary step of the interim process since part of their duties should be to prepare the organization for a new leader and to either transition out of the role themselves or be transitioned into the role as the permanent hire. Bridges (1986) refers to the transition out of an interim as a three-step process that begins with letting go of the old situation, going through "the neutral zone" (p. 25) between the old reality and the new reality, and then finally accepting and starting a new reality with new relationships, priorities, and plans for the future.

In summary, there are different types of interims who can assume leadership during times of stability or during unplanned crises. Sometimes it is the departure of the interim's predecessor

that created the crisis. Those applying for or considering interim roles need to have candid conversations with their current and (if different) interim supervisor to inquire about why the position is vacant, expectations, autonomy, benefits, and risks (Alley, 2005). Since this study focused on internal interims, it is salient to look at how an interim candidate feels connected to the people within the organization and organization itself. Interims need to ask themselves, "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" (Browning & Boys, 2015, p. 165).

Interims: Achievement, Accomplishment, Advancement, and Fulfillment

When deciding whether to take on an interim role, the literature presents a wide spectrum of information and factors for interims to consider if given the choice to accept the role. Such factors include the process of transitioning back to their old role, feelings of self-confidence in their new role, and feelings of personal accomplishment, achievement, and fulfillment throughout the entire interim process. Although it is possible that an interim leader may be asked to stay in the role permanently, most interims need to be prepared to transition and relinquish power to a successor. This move out of the position also includes preparing to return to the role that was left for the interim vacancy (Farquhar, 1995). There may need to be retraining or retooling if the interim has been away from their previous role for too long. Farrell (2018) found that interims may feel awkward when returning to their previous role if the interim leader supervised employees who were and/or are now peers. All of this, of course, rests on the assumption that their previous role/job is still there for them to return to.

For those looking to fill an interim vacancy, the type of interim (many of which are mentioned in the previous section) must be clearly identified from the onset of the search in order to find a successful interim to fulfill the duties required for the role. Depending on the duties and responsibilities for the interim role, and any factors associated with eligibility, such as

a hiring freeze, the list of viable candidates may be limited to a certain population like internal employees and employees with a particular skill set. Thus, aspects like career motivation, resilience, and self-confidence are popular characteristics identified for those seeking an interim role (London, 2020). Factors like these are important due to interims often questioning their self-confidence and abilities when considering an interim role. Self-perceived stigmas to "prove oneself" may also hinder one's sense of accomplishment (Browning & McNamee, 2012).

Accomplishment

Though interims may have doubts about their abilities to lead and perform, it is important to remember that during times of uncertainty and unpredictability, these feelings can impact even the most seasoned leaders and practitioners. To this end, employees can be motivated through feeling a sense of accomplishment in their roles (Ganta, 2014). Moreover, being acknowledged for a job well done, especially with a team of employees, instills a sense of accomplishment for the *group*. Hector and Aguirre (2009) reiterated this perspective and noted that social relationships are strengthened by such person-based, situational opportunities. Like the varying definitions for interim leadership, feelings of accomplishment may be internalized by interims who perform their duties for the personal challenge, and for the benefit of the team (Ganta, 2014).

Achievement

A sense of achievement that an interim may feel can come from many places, and at any point in their experience. An interim can begin by asking themselves why they were asked in the serve in the first place (Mundt, 2004). What did their supervisor or the person responsible for finding a competent interim see in them that served as a motivator to apply and/or accept the challenge of the role? The literature offers several suggestions for this question. The first

suggestion is that the internal interim candidates display a strong sense of service and altruism to the institution (Browning & Boys, 2015; Hector & Aguirre, 2009; Kroth, 2007; Mundt, 2004). Additionally, the motivation to go above and beyond is heightened when interims believe the organization and supervisor is fair and committed to their success. Another finding is that the interim has the potential to affect employees' perceptions on human capital (Birasnav et al. 2010). Namely, they can influence others. According to Ganta (2014), these factors are all intrinsic motivators, meaning that the interim derives some personal enjoyment and satisfaction from their achievement. Extrinsic motivators involve promotion, social recognition, fame, and supervision which addresses the need for power and advancement (Pardee, 1990).

Advancement

Advancement into an interim position is a promotion goal, meaning that the experience can serve as a stepping-stone in one's career (Kroth, 2007). Being asked to take on an interim role during an unpredictable time for an uncertain amount of time and with potentially unexpected duties requires an understanding that one's identity within the institution will change (Browning & Boys, 2015). Interims must consider not only how they will transition into the role, but also how they transition out. If the interim returns to their old role, which according to Farquhar (1995) is to be expected, the interim must ask how the skills gained from the experience prepare them for the next step in their career (Mundt, 2004). Taking on more challenging work offers interim leaders the chance to grow in areas that may not be available in their old position (Hector & Aguirre, 2009; MacAyeal, 2017). Mundt (2004) added that specifically at the dean and director level the opportunity to do real work that has consequences for the organization and its history and continuity serves as a unique motivator. Taking on more

challenging work offers interims the chance to grow professionally in areas that may not be available in their permanent positions.

With the assumption that temporary workers are more likely to reduce their engagement and be less productive compared to permanent employees (Felfe & Franke, 2010), interims need to be motivated to take on a provisional role. Feeling empowered to achieve the work and to think futuristically about how an interim role can potentially groom them for future leadership highlights how need for power can be actualized (McClelland, 1961).

Fulfillment

The final component of the literature review links the need for achievement and accomplishment to the need of fulfillment, which is twofold. First, interims explore the need for personal achievement and fulfillment for themselves and for the organization as a whole. Interims ask themselves, "What can I do for the organization?" According to Aguirre and Bolton (2013), this altruistic thinking shows care and concern not just for themselves but for others around them. The other component of fulfillment involves the personal growth that can result from taking on and completing an interim role. This growth includes career enhancement and development that will help them in the future (Mundt, 2004, p. 501).

Interims in Student Affairs

Student affairs is a relatively new functional area in institutions of higher education, with the first student affairs administrators emerging around the turn of the 20th century to work on student personnel matters such as student conduct, vocational guidance, and academic support (Long, 2012). Over time, student affairs work gained recognition for its contributions to supporting student success, as first noted in the 1937 publication of *Student Personnel Point of View*, which emphasized educating the whole student. The historic concept of *in loco parentis* as

a guiding ethos for student affairs work began to change with the 1961 case of Dixon v. Alabama which provided more rights and due process to students (Long, 2012). Today, student affairs administrators continue to play a critical role in supporting the mission of higher education to develop students while also being responsive to crisis events that emerge (Nuss, 2003, p. 83).

The Field of Student Affairs

Student affairs can consist of multiple offices and departments. Described as functional areas by Long (2012), these organizations differ in structure depending on the size of the institution and its needs. Broadly though, these functional areas, each with their staffing structure, can include residential life, student activities, counseling, and health services (Rodriguez, 2021). Student affairs is not impervious to using interim leadership during times of change and "tragic events" (Boerner, 2011, p. viii). However, literature on interims, specifically within student affairs, is limited. Moreover, literature pertaining to interims taking on roles during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic is even more scarce. One possible explanation for this could be that the term crisis is conceptual and may mean different things to different people. Nuss (2003) cited the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, as a crisis for student affairs professionals, who had to suspend everyday operations to provide counseling and support. Wang and Hutchins (2010) provide more examples of crisis including the collapse of the Texas A&M bonfire in 1999 that killed 11 students, and the University of Colorado football scandal from 2004 which alleged that sex and alcohol were used to attract recruits. As a result, student affairs professionals have dealt with a range of crisis situations over time.

Given that interim leadership is a temporary event and being in a state of crisis is also (hopefully) a temporary event, there are gaps in the literature that address the temporality of this

kind of leadership. This study sought to update literature and fill gaps pertaining to interim leaders in student affairs serving during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Crisis Leadership in Student Affairs

While literature pertaining to disaster prevention is growing, crisis leadership, especially through the lens of a student affairs practitioner, is often overlooked (Akers, 2007). In recent years, crisis events within higher education like the Virginia Tech shooting of 2007 which left 32 people dead, and the 2001 Oklahoma State University plan crash that killed 10 members of the men's basketball team gained increased media attention (Treadwell, 2016). Student affairs practitioners are often seen as first responders to crisis events that emerge in the community. Oftentimes those in senior leadership positions in student affairs carry the responsibility of responding to a crisis by serving as an advisor to the president and provost and tending to the emotional needs of the campus community (Treadwell, 2016). However, it is important to note that depending on the size of the institution, titles and functional areas may vary. Mid-level administrators may include deans, directors, and assistant directors (Rodriguez, 2021).

Like interim leadership, crisis can impact the student community in different ways including academic performance, and overall emotional and mental well-being (Akers, 2007). Thus, as new crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic arise, how have student affairs practitioners adapted and responded? Martin (2020) offers several points on this matter. First, messaging to colleagues, faculty, and students must balance compassion, candidness, realism, and optimism (Martin, 2020). Sending the right message at the right time, and in the tone can mean the difference between a response that can inspire or demotivate people. Interim leaders have the challenge of possessing the authority to conduct this type of messaging and the need to connect to the larger college structure to know more about the institutional response. Second,

making prompt yet informed decisions show strength and courage during an unpredictable period (Martin, 2020). Finally, staying visible and speaking authentically conveys a sense of togetherness (Martin, 2020). Leaders in student affairs, especially during and after periods of crisis believe it is their responsibility to help their community in a meaningful way (Treadwell, 2016).

Chapter Summary

The literature about interim leadership during times of crisis is limited. This gap is partly due to varying definitions of what constitutes a crisis, and differing definitions between interim vs. acting leadership roles. The literature identifies several types of interim leaders who assume a certain style of leadership while in the role. Aligned with most of the prior qualitative literature on interim leadership, I looked at the experiences of internal, interim leaders in dean/director roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using McClelland's (1961) Achievement Motivation Theory as a framework, data from participants were used to identify motivators for accepting interim roles.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to collect narrative stories from student affairs leaders who served in an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to explore their motivations for why they accepted an interim role during a crisis. Stories denote narrative, so a qualitative approach was used to collect data from participants. The depth and detail from qualitative narrative inquiry helped identify themes for this study. This chapter will outline and explain the paradigm and approach used for the study. Additionally, details pertaining to data generation, sampling, and analysis are contextualized.

Paradigm Selection

A research paradigm can be defined as a set of common beliefs about how problems should be understood and addressed (Kuhn, 1997). Paradigms should also address ontological (what is reality), epistemological (how do you know something), and methodological (how do you find knowledge) questions (Mack, 2010). Understanding these concepts is crucial for researchers who are trying to evaluate the research of others while conducting their own research. There are many questions researchers need to ask themselves and consider. What are the goals of the research? What assumptions are present? What beliefs and values do the researcher and participants hold? I conducted this study through an interpretivist paradigm as I explored the primary research questions of "What motivated individuals to accept an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic" and "What are the narrative stories of interim administrators during the COVID19 pandemic." The next sections will provide greater understanding of what

this paradigm is, why this paradigm was the best fit to address the research questions, and how I used this paradigm throughout the study.

An interpretive approach seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of those who experienced an event (Hammersley, 2013; Schwandt, 1994; Woods & Graber, 2016). Sociologist Max Weber was a pivotal influencer of this approach that seeks to understand an experience rather than explain it (Mack, 2010; Schwandt, 1994). For this study, I focused on obtaining the narratives of administrators in student affairs who took on an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic and their motivation(s) for why they did so. Given that interpretivism believes multiple people have varying perspectives on a life experience (Mack, 2010), the interpretivist approach was optimal since I am trying to understand the various narratives from participants to ascertain their motivation(s) for why they accepted an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interpretivism is not without limitations or ontological or epistemological assumptions. Addressing these assumptions provides clarity for how knowledge is created and interpreted. One assumption is that causation in the social sciences is derived from interpreted meaning (Mack, 2010). Realistically, meaning is determined by the researcher who is explaining the experiences of the participants. However, interpretivists do not seek to generalize, only demystify (Mack, 2010). Also, the role of the researcher can come under scrutiny in an interpretivist study. Researchers give voice to participants and their experiences by collecting descriptive data through detailed narratives (Woods & Graber, 2016). Thus, in this paradigm the researcher cannot separate themselves from their relationship with participants. Given the nature of the narratives being studied, researchers often immerse themselves in the research environment to develop candor and rapport with participants, and to listen for and obtain the

essences of the participants' experiences (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2014). My interest in this topic stems from my personal experience of serving as an interim director in student affairs during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the researcher, I will readily acknowledge that I will be interpreting the experiences of the participants and not my own experiences and perspectives. My own experience as an interim may help build rapport with the participants and may allow me to understand nuances of the narratives of the participants.

Reiterating that interpretivist research focuses on concepts like experiences with people, and understanding rather than explaining, the interpretivist researcher aims to look for meaning behind people's actions and behaviors (Chowdhury, 2014). As I attempted to learn what motivated people to accept interim roles during the pandemic, I acknowledge that each participant had a unique perspective. Thus, to understand and learn from participants' experiences, I embraced an exploratory rather than an explanatory mindset (Hammersley, 2013).

McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory

In this narrative study, I generated qualitative data pertaining to the experiences of higher education administrators serving in an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary questions for participants in this study focused on what motivated them to accept this interim role, and their experiences as an interim. While considering an appropriate framework to use for this study, I contemplated my previous experience as an interim leader to consider my own needs and motivations. Thus, I selected motivation as a framework to explore the antecedents of the participants more fully in taking an interim role. When looking at various motivational frameworks, McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory, first proposed by psychologist David McClelland in 1961, was selected over other motivational theories like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which postulates that people are motivated through the five basic and

compounding needs of physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization. The perspectives McClelland posits about an individual's motivation being influenced by needs of achievement, affiliation, or power provided more nuance relative to the motivations for seeking leadership positions and was more aligned with the goals of this study. Additionally, these motivators are acquired through life experiences and can predict behavior (Ball, 2012; Moore et al., 2010). A brief review of the history of this framework and salient assumptions surrounding the use of this framework provides a greater perspective about its fit for my study. Lastly, the argument for why this motivational model best fits the current research approach is addressed and clarified.

McClelland's work with motivation began in the 1940s, when he identified and analyzed motives related to achievement (Moore et al., 2010). The concept of motivation is nebulous and difficult to define but Ray (1992) provides a compelling definition that describes motivation as a process that instigates behavior, gives purpose to behavior, and leads to choosing a particular behavior. McClelland's theory postulated that people are motivated in varying degrees by needs of achievement, affiliation, and power, and unlike Maslow, are not compounding from prior needs. Moreover, regardless of gender or age, these motivations develop over an individual's lifetime.

Achievement

Achievement can be defined as something done successfully, typically by effort, courage, risk-taking, or skill (Moore et al., 2010). The need for achievement is "the desire to accomplish something difficult, attain a high standard of success, and master complex tasks" (Moore et al., 2010, p. 25). Achievers take responsibility for finding solutions to problems, and value feedback from others, to include subordinates, peers, and supervisors about goals (Pardee, 1990). It is

worth noting that even though an individual may fail at successfully achieving their goal, having sought to achieve the goal itself is also worthy of some achievement. Thus, failure can still be motivating, and a person can feel accomplished having even attempted a task (Ganta, 2014).

Power

Individuals who display a need for power have a desire to be influential in the eyes of others such as their current or new supervisor for the interim role (Kroth, 2007; Moore et al., 2010). Interims who feel supported by one or both supervisors are more likely to perform what Kroth (2007) calls, Organizational Citizenship Behaviors. These behaviors go beyond expectations for a particular role. The concept of power also includes seeking positions of authority and wanting to make an impact on others if given power, authority, and responsibility for others. This increased power could result in increased status and recognition in an organization and among other individuals. For an interim leader, this increased power may only be as temporary as their interim appointment.

Affiliation

Lastly, individuals who desire affiliation need a sense of belonging in their organization (Kroth, 2007). This sense of belonging can result from establishing, maintaining, or even restoring relationships with others (Moore et al., 2010). As noted earlier, interim appointments can be planned, or sudden and unexpected. Workplace relationships between employees and supervisors may undergo a transition during a change in leadership (Bridges, 1986). Thus, establishing or maintaining warm friendships with others may come at the expense of avoiding conflict with others. Exemplified, a supervisor may implement a friendly competition between employees to spur productivity. At the end of the competition, top performers are publicly recognized and rewarded (Ganta, 2014).

The three motivations proposed by McClelland rests on the belief that people's needs are driven by one or more motivators (e.g., achievement, power, and affiliation) and that needs are learned over their lifetime through the experiences individuals have in different environments (Pardee, 1990). These motivations can also be extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation occurs when the source of the motivation comes from factors outside the individual such as promotions, social recognitions, fame, money, and material achievements (Ganta, 2014). Intrinsic motivation means that the source of the motivation comes from within the individual. Examples of intrinsic motivations include personal enjoyment and a deep-rooted belief that the organization is fair (Ganta, 2014; Kroth, 2007).

Revisiting the focus of the study as it relates to the theoretical framework, I obtained the narratives of student affairs administrators serving in an interim dean or director role during the COVID-19 pandemic and the motivations for why they accepted the role. Using McClelland's framework allowed me an opportunity to explore the motivators of achievement, power, and affiliation and how these motivators had an impact on the interim's motivation for why they accepted the interim role. Lastly, these data were generated by using narrative inquiry.

Research Approach: Narrative Inquiry

Nigerian poet Ben Okri (1997) wrote, "We live by stories. We also live in them" (p. 46). Telling stories helps people understand their personal or another person's thinking, actions, and reactions (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). For this research study, a narrative approach offered insights into the life experiences of an interim student affairs administrator over time and sought to honor the experiences of these leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants' stories were a source of knowledge and understanding (Clandinin, 2013). To better understand the intricacies of narrative inquiry I needed to establish a working definition, acknowledge

historical underpinnings, and contextualize the use of narrative inquiry in a higher-education environment, and specifically for this study.

Defining Narrative Inquiry

There is no one definition of narrative research nor what constitutes narrative research. However, several commonalities could be extracted from a review of literature on narrative designs. Narrative can be defined in many ways but is most often associated with the word "story" (Clandinin, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) added more context to a narrative inquiry by asserting the importance of the inquirer learning through participants in a particular setting such as a school. Participants' stories can be personal from what they experienced, or social from how they engaged with others. While these definitions offer brief insights into what defines narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2013) offered the definition that I used for this study: that narrative inquiry focuses on the four factors of living, telling, retelling, and reliving. To better illustrate this concept, consider this; people live out stories and tell stories of their lived experiences. People retell these stories to researchers who inquire into their lived experiences. As people retell their stories, they may relive their experiences and have different insights as a result of the retelling.

In addition to the aforementioned definition of narrative inquiry, there are additional components of narrative inquiry worth mentioning. Narrative research emerges from stories that include a temporal ordering of events (Sandelowski, 1991). These stories can be descriptive, where the researcher is focused on describing individual narratives, or explanatory where the researcher is more interested in why something happened. For the purposes of this study, the primary focus is to describe the experiences of interim leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the element of temporality requires clarification. Individuals are constantly revising their

autobiographies (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Inquiries about someone's life and living are always in temporal transition. Each narrative is a story comprised of different settings, characters, and happenings. While each participant's lived experience may contain similar elements (e.g., all participants were administrators who took on an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic), each narrative, including the temporal ordering of events, will be different (Sandelowski, 1991).

Researchers and participants alike may not fully grasp terms like living, telling, retelling, and reliving. There may also be endless assumptions held pertaining to the nature of what narrative inquiry is, and what it is not. Epistemologically, there is an assumption that people can readily make sense of experiences through story structures (Bell, 2002). Realistically, stories and storytelling differ widely between individuals and cultures. Narrative inquiry is more than simply analyzing and examining stories for commonalities and insights. A crucial aspect of narrative research is "recognizing that one's understanding of people and events changes" (Bell, 2002, p. 209). People telling stories about their lived experiences has been gaining traction in educational research (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). To this end, a brief history of narrative research may provide additional perspective to why this approach has gained popularity in the social sciences.

History of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry has deep roots in social science research. Every culture has ways of collecting and telling stories. This history of storytelling could help explain why narrative inquiry is an old practice that may feel new (Clandinin, 2006). Riessman (2008) went as far back as Aristotle to examine the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place within the Greek tragedies. These concepts, especially time and temporal ordering, are familiar concepts to narrative researchers who try to articulate the stories told by their participants (Riessman, 2008). More recently, since the 1980s and over the last 20 years, researchers in the social sciences have

gravitated towards narrative inquiry when studying experiences (Clandinin, 2013). These narratives provide a deeper understanding of human phenomenon than what is observed from the physical world. Thus, telling stories, especially stories over time, provides practical applications in educational research.

Why Narrative Inquiry

It is important to reiterate salient points of this approach and how they relate to the research focus of this study. Narrative inquiry offers rich insights into the experiences of events (Carless & Douglas, 2017). Remembering that a goal of this study was to look at the experiences and motivations for why administrators accepted an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic, narratives can serve different purposes, including to remember, argue, engage, and entertain (Riessman, 2008). As a practitioner working in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, being able to learn from and understand the distinctive perspectives of the participants involved allowed me to retell stories by being a storyteller (Hammersley, 2013). Thus, it was important to select participants who could provide a rich description of their experiences to retell.

Sampling

"All sampling is done with some purpose in mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 199). The sample for this study narrated how interim administrators were motivated to seek these roles during the COVID-19 pandemic as what they experienced as an interim. The following sections will add context to the operational definition of sampling, the types of sampling methods used to solicit participants for this study, and the rationale for doing so. A portion of a population is called a *sample* (Etikan et al., 2016). In qualitative research, the sample is the selection of specific sources for data generated to address the research topic (Gentles et al., 2015). Several different types of sampling methods were used for this study to limit who could provide the best

information-rich data. This process is referred to as purposive or judgment sampling, which is common in qualitative research (Gentles et al., 2015; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2011). Here, willing participants were recognized and selected based on the knowledge they possessed to describe an experience or even a group or culture to which they belonged (Bernard, 2017; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the criteria to participate was limited to administrators who began serving in an interim role with titles such as Director, Dean, or Vice-President of Student Affairs (VPSA) role within student affairs between March 2020–May 2022.

One sampling method I used was homogeneous sampling. With this method, participants all possess similar characteristics such as a similar job or life experience (Etikan et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). Given that the focus of this study was to interview administrators in interim roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, this method was logical and efficient as a sampling technique to recruit participants in interim student affairs leadership roles during the pandemic. I solicited participants by submitting posts (Appendix A) through two channels. First, I posted a call for participants on my personal LinkedIn profile. Friends and colleagues also reposted this call for volunteers on their personal LinkedIn profile pages. This method led to at least two participants expressing interest in the study. The other method involved posting a call for volunteers on the social-media Facebook group: Student Affairs and Higher Education Professionals. This group has over 39,000 members including myself. In both posts/calls for participants, I included a brief description of the study and asked that participants have their interim experience between March 2020–May 2022 at a mid-sized public institution in the Mid-Atlantic region. Ultimately, of the seven participants selected for this study, three were from public institutions in Virginia, one was from a public institution in North Carolina, one was from a public institution in Massachusetts, and two were from private institutions in Massachusetts.

Additionally, the dates for the participants' interim experience extended beyond my original window as some continued their interim roles beyond May 2022. Thus, as long as the participants began their interim experience between March 2020–May 2022, they were considered viable. To determine viable participants from those responding to the call for participants, I provided all volunteers with an online Demographic Survey (Appendix B) to obtain additional information about their institution, duties/responsibilities, and interim experience. Although the original goal was to select 10 participants who had similar work histories and experiences that were as closely related as possible, I ended up interviewing most of the participants who responded to the study. Three participants were rejected due to their interim experiences beginning too far outside of the timeframe listed for the study. The reason and rationale for this was that the participants, and the institution where they were an interim were not in a state of crisis from the COVID-19 pandemic where there were hiring freezes or significant vacancies. Additionally, I only interview individuals who said "yes" when asked to fill an interim role. I confirmed with each person selected to participate in the study that they met the criteria listed above. Ideally, a sample size of at least 10 participants was sought for this study, yet only seven individuals volunteered who met the criteria after repeated calls/posts for participation were not answered. This lower number was still sufficient to draw themes out about their experiences.

Methods for Data Generation

Before any data were generated for this study each participant received an electronic consent form outlining the purpose of the research, what the study involved, their rights, anonymity, and procedures if they decide to opt out of the study at any time (Edwards & Holland, 2013). After receiving the signed form from the participants, I scheduled a zoom interview with the participant. A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix C.

Multiple methods of data generation were planned, including two interviews (per participant) and artifact collection (e.g., position descriptions) from participants. Six of the seven participants did schedule and participate in two interviews, but one participant did not reply to repeated attempts to schedule and meet for the second follow-up interview. Additionally, none of the participants provided any artifacts to the researcher. This lack of artifacts was largely because all but one of the participants were never given a position description prior to accepting the interim role. The intended use of multiple data sources was to strengthen my understanding of what the participants were trying to convey through their stories. This concept, also called triangulation, is used in conjunction with member checking, where I return analyzed data to a participant for accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). A limitation of the study was the lack of artifacts for me to evaluate and determine the connections participants made in their stories, and the lack of artifacts also is an important finding because their absence highlights how different interim leadership roles are from permanent positions and how the crisis may have contributed to a lack of follow-through on this common interview search element. Member checking allowed me to recognize and be cognizant of any biases, assumptions, values, and ideas I bring to the research (Birt et al., 2016; Etikan et al., 2016). This outcome was mostly achieved during the second interview with each participant. In each of the second interviews, I spent the first few minutes covering what was conveyed in the first interview and used those responses to help craft questions for the second interview.

Additionally, prior to scheduling the second interview, I sent participants an electronic prompt (Appendix D) listing McClelland's motivator (achievement, power, and affiliation) and asked what they thought their primary motivators were. I also included a "none of these" option in the event that a participant felt as though none of McClelland's motivators were motivators for

them. The use of reflexive journaling methods helped to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. These concepts, along with the specific data generation methods are expanded upon and clarified.

Demographic Survey

Each participant completed a short demographic survey prior to the first interview. The questions in the survey, listed in Appendix B, were mostly closed-ended, meaning that responses may be as simple as a yes/no, a date range, or job title. The survey was designed to give me some knowledge of the participants and their lived experiences (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The questions were structured in a sequential manner for continuity. For example, the question about whether the participant was ever evaluated while in the interim role came after whether they were ever given a position description. Responses to the questions also provided me with potential follow-up questions for interviews, which were semi-structured in nature.

Interviews

Interviews were the primary method of generating data from the participants. Narrative interviewing emerged during the 1970s and 1980s and focused on a person's life experience during salient events (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020). These events could include schooling, friendships, or for the purposes of this study, work-related issues. A narrative style of interviewing, called doxastic interviewing, was used for this study. Doxastic interviewing focuses on understanding the participant's lived experiences (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020) as an interim leader during the COVID-19 pandemic. For me to understand the individual lived experiences from participants and not be influenced by my own assumptions or experience I "bracketed" my knowledge and past experiences from the process (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020). I also "bridled" my own bias and understanding so that I did not try to understand too

quickly or haphazardly (Janak, 2018). Data generated from doxastic interviews is usually unilateral, meaning that only the participant provides the data. Throughout my interviews I limited myself to only asking clarifying, contextual, and probing questions. I did not challenge or disagree with data provided by participants (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020). Thus, I was tasked with listening and recording the unique insight into a social phenomenon rather than sharing my opinion.

As previously mentioned, interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I used a combination of pre-determined questions in conjunction with improvised, follow-up questions. Semi-structured interviews are the most popular method of data generation for qualitative interviews due to their flexibility (Kallio et al., 2016). The questions for the first interview, listed in Appendix E, were designed to encourage participants to speak freely and extensively on their experiences as an interim leader (Brenner, 2006). The questions addressed a combination of topics that relate to the research focus. Some questions broadly inquired about the participant's experience as an interim administrator, along with their duties and roles. Another group of questions explored the theoretical framework of the study by inquiring about the participant's accomplishments and achievements, any changes in power and authority, and the depth and quality of relationships with others during the interim role.

Data generated from the first interview were used to craft questions for the second, follow-up interview. This second interview was typically scheduled for 2-3 weeks after the first interview, was shorter in length than the first interview and served two functions. First, the interview allowed me an opportunity to expand upon any specific area from the first interview where additional data from the participant could be helpful. Questions could begin with "We talked about (a certain topic) in our first interview and I wanted to go into more depth

surrounding (a certain topic)" (Turner, 2010, p. 759). To help facilitate this process, participants were given some prompted questions to respond to prior to the second interview. As previously mentioned, one of the questions specifically asked them if they were particularly motivated by achievement, power, affiliation, or none of those factors. The second function of the secondary interview allowed me to engage in additional member checking while generating more data. See Appendix F for sample questions.

Artifacts

Additionally, prior to the second interview I reminded the participants that any artifacts related to their interim position, such as position descriptions, evaluations, etc. could be submitted at any time throughout the data collection process. Physical documents, which could include notes and drawings could also serve as a source of additional data for a study (Wildemuth, 2009). The question of whether a position description was provided to the participant before taking on the role was asked in the Demographic Survey so I already had a general sense of how many I could expect prior to the second interview. As noted above, none of the participants were given a position description prior to assuming their interim role. Had the participant submitted documents, I could have asked follow-up questions pertaining to specific duties, and whether the items listed on the document were the duties that the interim was responsible for while in the role. However, none of the participants provided any artifacts to me.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of research can generally be referred to as the degree of confidence in its data and methods (Connelly, 2016). While criteria, such as the dependability of data over time, conformability of consistent findings, and transferability of findings in other settings are all criteria for trustworthiness, the credibility or confidence in the truth of the study is essential

(Connelly, 2016). One such way to help ensure trustworthiness and credibility in the study is through member checking.

Member Checking

There were several instances where, throughout the data collection process, member checking occurred. First, I used a transcription program called Otter to record and transcribe interviews in real-time. A benefit of Otter is that when interviews were being scheduled and placed on calendars, my Otter account, called "Terence's Otter-pilot" was a participant and would not only record and transcribe interviews, but also send a copy to the participant during the interview. Rather than returning collected data from interviews to check for accuracy participants were instantly given a copy of the transcription (Birt et al., 2016). Second, I did a member check during the interviews by restructuring the narrative statements from the participants to ask follow-up questions. The intent was to minimize misunderstandings early in the data generation process (Turner, 2010). Lastly, I followed up with participants in the second interview to see if they had any concerns or comments from our first interview. The multiple forms of member checking gave participants multiple opportunities to correct any inaccuracies in the data. During this member checking process, the participants did not have any comments or concerns.

Data Saturation

The use of multiple sources to obtain data combined with numerous member checks of the data helped with the trustworthiness of the data generated. Remembering that the goal of the study was to obtain the lived experiences of interim administrators and the motivations for why they accepted the role, there were points both early on and around the sixth interview where themes emerged. This concept is referred to as data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data

saturation is more about the depth of the data generated over the number of participants in the sample. Thus, it was crucial for me to analyze data in real time during the interview, not only to member check, but to identify themes for analysis.

Methods for Data Analysis

In narrative analysis, the retelling of events related to personal experiences often has a temporal element with a beginning, middle, and end (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). For the purposes of this study, the timeline included the participant's narrative before taking on the interim role, during the role, and after leaving the role. With such a vast timeframe to consider for the period being studied it was necessary to use a method of analysis that was flexible with the volume of data collected. Therefore, the use of thematic analysis to systematically identify and organize data into themes, patterns, commonalities, and meanings seemed logical. This method of analysis is rapidly becoming widely recognized in narrative analysis because multiple patterns could emerge across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This inductive approach to data analysis and coding meant that the themes were derived from the content of the data generated and collected from the interviews. The thematic analysis approach has six phases.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data

Phase one involved me becoming familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Each participant had two recorded interviews (except for one participant as noted above), totaling 90-120 minutes in length across the two interviews. The recordings were transcribed in real-time using audio-to-text software and then reviewed for accuracy. Very little editing was needed for the transcription conducted by the Otter software. Additional data also included the demographic survey, and prompt for the second interview.

Phase 2: Generate Initial Codes

Phase two involved generating initial codes. Given the volume of data from the interviews, the data was clustered, meaning that I derived themes from an entire section of the data, rather than going line-by-line. These codes were brief and descriptive rather than explanatory (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Remembering that the focus of this narrative study was to retell stories rather than explain, the codes for the themes reflected that process. I was cognizant of how the codes being generated related back to the research focus for obtaining the lived experiences of interim administrators during the pandemic and the motivations for why they accepted the role. A short list of a priori codes (Appendix G), identified salient themes from the literature as to some of the reasons why an individual may be motivated to accept an interim role. Several codes beyond what was found in the literature and listed in Appendix G emerged during this phase. These codes, including burnout, stress, staffing, and failure were evident in most of the interviews. Given the number of similar but still differing codes that were emerging from the interviews, I used the software program Dedoose to assist with coding. The a priori codes were expanded, resulting in the generation of 101 additional codes. Again, many of the codes such as burnout, exhaustion, and fatigue were all used, but were individually coded in Dedoose.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Phase three of data analysis involved searching for themes within the codes that were generated. A theme is more than commonality, it is an important concept that is often reiterated by multiple participants (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This step involved looking for overlaps with certain words, phrases, and descriptions, not just in one specific interview, but across multiple interviews involving multiple participants. In this stage, the codes of stress, burnout, exhaustion, etc. were combined to form the theme of "Emotionally Draining." Another example included

combining the codes doubt, failure, imposture syndrome, in control to form the theme of "fear." These themes contributed to the findings reported in Chapter 4.

Phase 4: Reviewing Potential Themes

Once the themes were identified, phase four of analysis involved reviewing the potential themes in greater detail. This phase is often seen as a check for the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This was an ideal time in the analysis to member check to see if the themes that I had originally identified accurately reflected the narratives of the participants. There was no specific number of themes to obtain, and it is important to remember that larger themes can often be split into smaller themes, and larger themes can be collapsed together (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A priori codes, which were essentially broad themes at the time were shared with participants during the second interview, specifically while inquiring about the motivations of achievement, power, and affiliation. None of the participants had any comments or concerns with the themes.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Phase five involved clearly naming and defining the list of themes that were identified. This process involved a deep analysis of a theme and then writing a concise definition explaining why the theme was distinct (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Keeping in mind how the original codes that were generated in phase two were succinct, this step added content and substance to the themes.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The last step of the analysis was to produce a coherent report of themes that would ultimately retell the story of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Originally, the intent was to attempt to structure themes in a temporal manner, describing them as the time before participants accepted the interim role, the time when participants were in the interim role, and the time after participants exited the interim role. Most of the themes that emerged, however,

centered around the participants while they were in the interim role. The six steps associated with thematic analysis are straightforward, but it is important to keep in mind that steps are sequential, and build off one another. If the data are not fully analyzed by the researcher or member checked by the participants, the analysis will be weak, and the results will be unconvincing (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I adhered to all six steps to help build credibility in the findings.

Quality Criteria: Tracy's Big-Tent

As previously indicated, measures such as triangulation and member checking were used in this narrative study to help ensure trustworthiness. In addition to member checking, the use of Tracy's (2010) big-tent criteria for research provided additional quality controls for this study. This model uses eight criteria to assess quality in qualitative research including: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, meaningful coherence. Each will be briefly clarified to provide context as to how the criteria pertains to the research study.

Worthy Topic

Worthy topics are interesting and provide insight on new topics (Tracy, 2010). Literature on interim leadership is outdated, and literature involving the pandemic is still relatively new. Thus, combining these factors together in this study provides readers with an opportunity to learn more about temporary leadership during a temporary pandemic. Incorporating the theoretical framework of motivation adds insight for practitioners considering an interim role or supervisors who need to hire and supervise one. For example, if a theme of the study indicates that interim leaders often feel marginalized and unsupported in their interim role, it would be valuable to be aware of this knowledge if you are a supervisor of an interim employee in the future.

Rich Rigor

A richness of data can be obtained through using a variety of data types (Tracy, 2010). I used semi-structured interviews, demographic surveys, and interview prompts to collect and generate data. The semi-structured interviews provided enough flexibility to allow participants to dictate the direction and depth of the interviews. Rigor involves obtaining a sufficient depth of data from participants and using appropriate measures to ensure that the data was collected and analyzed appropriately (Tracy, 2010). There was not a specific or limited timeframe for generating and analyzing data, and there no significant gaps between the interviews and the analysis stages. Throughout the data collection process, I was transparent with participants about the process of collecting and organizing the data obtained (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017).

Sincerity

Relating back to the importance of building rapport with participants, sincerity can be obtained by being transparent with participants (Tracy, 2010). This transparency can include truthfulness about mistakes through the data collection process (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). The consent form was used to outline information pertaining to risks. The use of a Researcher as Instrument Statement also outlines beliefs and values I held throughout this study. Lastly, self-reflexive exercises in which I journaled shortcoming openly acknowledge that I was a research instrument in this study.

Credibility & Resonance

Creditability can be associated with trustworthiness and is achieved through triangulation (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). Resonance refers to the impact and influence the research can have on others and what Tracy (2010) calls evocative representation. The use of thick description from the thematic data analysis along with the reflexive measures added trustworthiness and

credibility to the research being conducted. The semi-structured narrative interviews added resonance in that I allowed the participants to openly and freely express their lived experiences as an interim leader during the pandemic (Tracy, 2010).

Significant Contribution

Practically significant research asks if the research being conducted is generally useful (Tracy, 2010). The stories provided by the participants can contribute to the current body of literature which, as previously indicated, needs updating. Conducting research while in a pandemic also presents unique opportunities and challenges for future research and replication. The intent of this research was not to change minds or policies. However, depending on the results there may be implications for how practitioners in the field recruit, train, compensate, and set-up interim leaders for success.

Ethical

The adherence to a comprehensive consent form, use of member checking, and researcher reflexivity all acted as checks to ensure the ethical integrity of the process (Tracy, 2010). Procedural ethics, such as Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was achieved for the protection of human subjects (Tracy, 2010). Safeguarding the anonymity of participants and their data was a constant process, especially while constructing their profiles in Chapter 4. If anonymity was breached, someone who served in an interim role at a specific institution may be easily identified. The use of what Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) call “relational ethics” (p. 9) are also important to consider while working with participants and involves treating participants kindly and with dignity and respect rather than mere subjects and participants.

Meaningful Coherence

Studies that are coherent achieve what they set out to accomplish. Was I able to connect the paradigms, frameworks, methods, results, and discussions in a way that captivated readers (Tracy, 2010)? How does this relate back to current literature? The constant member checking helped to give me trustworthy data that in turn was used to generate themes for the final report.

Delimitations

Merriam-Webster (2024) defines a delimitation as "to fix or define the limits of." Concisely put, these are the decisions I made concerning the parameters of the study. There are several delimitations that came to mind for this research that restricted who was included in the overall sample. The first delimitation was the use of administrators serving only a salient leadership role. Given that most of the prior research conducted in interim leadership viewed interim leaders as someone who held a high position at the institution, I was aware that fewer deans and directors were likely to exist compared to lower, entry or mid-level staff. A second delimiting factor was the use of internal employees as interim leaders. Given the inconsistencies and irregularities with defining interim, acting, and temporary leaders the researcher (for the purposes of this study) defined interim leaders as an internal employee who was stepping out of their current role and into a temporary leadership role for an unspecified amount of time. A third delimitation pertained to the primary reliance on snowball sampling to obtain participants. Lastly, a fourth delimitation was the region of the country where the researcher solicited participants. Participants were solicited and snowball sampled from the mid-Atlantic region. Even though all these delimitations seemingly restricted the sample pool, it is more likely than not these interims were used to fill higher level roles rather than entry-level positions. I assumed that with these delimitations I could obtain at least 10 interim administrators in student affairs who wanted to participate in this research, which proved a challenge.

Limitations

Whereas delimitations are imposed by the researcher, limitations are factors beyond the control of the researcher. Several limitations came to mind while doing research during a pandemic. The first involved the memory and recollection of participants who served in an interim role. Given that the pandemic exerted its influence for over two years, some of the participants were not able to recall certain details, including emotions, thought processes, outcomes, and other details pertaining to their interim role. Careful attention was given to the phrasing of the semi-structured questions so the inquiry could be as broad as possible. The last limitation was my own bias. Given that I was in an interim at my institution, it was important to be reflexive and to reflect on how my role and experience may shape their interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2014).

Assumptions

Assumptions, according to Simon (2011), can be basic, but also be outside of our control. Without assumptions, our research problem could not exist. Any assumptions stated need to be justified. For example, I assumed that participants (those currently or previously in interim roles) would want to contribute to the study. While this likely proved somewhat true, some "would-be" participants may not have wanted to participate for a variety of reasons including time constraints or confidentiality concerns. Other assumptions pertained to beliefs that readers may hold about interim leaders and their effectiveness in the organization. Assumptions like these can be dispelled through a review of the literature.

Researcher as Instrument Statement

As the researcher for this study, my own reflexivity must be acknowledged. This involved mentioning my own experiences as an interim during the COVID-19 pandemic during

interviews with participants, as well as noting in my reflexive journal any beliefs, values, and expectations I held while conducting this research. The following sections add context and clarity to these elements as they relate to my study.

Experiences

I selected the topic of interim leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic for several reasons. First, I served in an interim leadership role at my current institution. Having never worked in an office with an interim leader or for a supervisor who was an interim, the topic piqued my interest as one worthy of research to gain a better understanding of the experiences of others. Second, the research on interim leadership within higher education is somewhat dated. Most of the studies discovered in the literature review were over 10 years old. This topic and concept should be continually updated within the body of literature. Finally, although interim leadership is dated, pandemic literature involving COVID-19 is still being produced. Being able to contribute literature to the field involving the pandemic will help establish a base of general literature for how the pandemic influenced a variety of factors in higher education.

Beliefs

I held several beliefs pertaining to the focus of the study. One of the primary beliefs was that interims currently still in an interim role and interims who were in the role during the pandemic but have since stepped out will view the topic of interim leadership differently compared to those serving in the interim role under other circumstances. Another belief is that my knowledge and beliefs pertaining to interim leadership is limited to what I have read, researched, or observed. What I know and thus believe is influenced by lived and shared experience on the topic. My background and experiences could have all potentially biased me throughout this study. I agree with parts of the literature which stated that interims often feel

marginalized and like a seat-warmer and worked to bracket my perspectives in interviews with participants and during data analysis. I think each interim had a different experience depending on who asked them to take on the interim role, how the question (to take on the interim role) was asked, the duration of the interim experience, and the transition in and out of the role.

Values

The values that I brought to this experience involved prior experiences and beliefs. As a former practitioner in student affairs, I am committed to treating others fairly and justly. This personal value means treating participants with respect and being objective. I tell the stories and perspectives of the participants, and honesty and transparency in the spoken word and what is written/recorded proved essential for open communication and trust with my participants.

Expectations

I prescribed to several expectations prior to the onset of the study. Expectations directed at the participants included truthfulness, collaboration, and authenticity with their responses, and timeliness with communication and correspondence. This proved true except for one participant who did not respond to repeated communications from the researcher to conduct a second interview. I also held various expectations for myself. These expectations were similar to those for the participants and also included tenacity to keep the data generation and analysis moving so as not to lose momentum.

Ethical Considerations

Although I was cognizant of foreseen ethical considerations like confidentiality, constant vigilance was maintained to anticipate and be prepared for unforeseen risks to participants and data. One of the most salient risks that I was mindful of involved not influencing the participants in any way by sharing my own experiences, outcomes, or opinions. Additionally, because of

their voluntary participation in the study, and the fact that some participants are still at their institution, at a different institution but in the same area/region, or still in the interim role, I wanted to assure participants that personally identifying information, especially information pertaining to criticisms and critiques of colleagues and supervisors would be concealed.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

There are several objectives for this chapter. The first is to provide readers with a short reminder about the research questions used for this study to help situate an understanding of the findings. Next, I provide a profile of the participants and their salient demographics, work histories, career paths, and motivators. Readers will begin to see how the participants share some similar experiences and how they differ from one another. Lastly, salient key findings pertaining to the two research questions are conveyed.

Review of Research Questions

I asked participants for their narrative stories regarding their interim experiences and their motivation(s) for why they accepted an interim leadership role in student affairs during the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously mentioned, narrative inquiry can offer insights of life experiences over time, and storytelling helps people understand something better and can be a source of knowledge. Given that the purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the experiences that student affairs leaders had while holding interim positions during the COVID-19 pandemic and to understand the motivation for seeking interim roles, providing insights about the participants' experiences helps inform the field about how to best support others in interim roles in student affairs.

Participant Profiles

Each participant, listed alphabetically by their pseudonym is profiled in this section. The participant profiles begin with available information about their demographics, followed by a recount of their career path that led them to the institution where they served as an interim. Their

position and duties are briefly summarized, and their current work concludes the profiles. All seven of the participants began serving in a dean, director, or vice-president of student affairs (VPSA) role at their institution between March 2020–May 2022. As of March 2024, one participant was still serving in the interim role at her institution. Additionally, all participants moved into their interim roles from within their functional areas.

There are two salient factors to note before presenting the participants' profiles. First, only five of the seven participants completed the voluntary demographic questions that asked for their age and ethnicity. Two of the male participants opted out of providing responses to these questions so their data are not available or included in their summaries. While I did not inquire as to why these participants decided to withhold this information, one possible explanation could be to better ensure their anonymity in this study. This explanation aligns with an initial assumption I held about a possible reluctance from those who served in interim roles to participate in the study out of concern for their anonymity. Second, to help protect the anonymity of all participants, certain details and specific information were omitted or intentionally kept broad and vague. Providing too many details about the participants, especially their titles, office/functional area, specific dates of their interim service, and their departure dates from the interim role, institution, or field, could identify factors that leads to unmasking their identity and compromising their anonymity.

Andrew

Andrew described his 20-year career path in the field of higher education as "unorthodox." His professional work spanned across multiple institutions and fields/disciplines including Residence Life and Multicultural offices. At one point in his mid-career, he briefly left the field to gain business experience before coming back to work in higher education. As a

seasoned professional in the field, Andrew provided information about his extensive background and experiences with student engagement/mentoring, coaching, budgeting, and staff supervision.

Andrew accepted an interim VPSA position at his mid-sized, public institution in the northeast after being asked by the president of the institution to step into the role. There was no position description provided for this new role or formal evaluation during or after serving in the role, though Andrew did receive extra compensation for stepping into the position. He recalled a conversation with the president in passing where he expressed interest in helping in a more meaningful way during COVID-19. He had been working at this institution in various roles for about 6 years before beginning his interim role in March 2020. Prior to accepting the interim role, he was serving as a director of a student affairs office that, among other factors, was a student facing office with a high degree of student contact and engagement.

He described his institution being "at a standstill" when the prior VPSA resigned in February 2020 just before the college began responding to the pandemic. Many areas under this purview, including his own office, were left unsupervised and needed direction. With students not on campus, staff members were working remotely until at least May 2020. While in the interim role, Andrew supervised six other departments. Each department faced their own unique problems including being short-staffed and adjusting to new modalities of communication and engagement with students who were not on campus. Andrew pointed out a particularly interesting observation from his interim experience that pertained to the budget he inherited. He reported seeing no change or impact to his operating budget while in the interim role. As a result, he was able to provide offices under his purview with resources to adjust and adapt to new methods of student support. He served in the interim role for 16 months, until July 2021. At that time, a new VPSA was hired who came from outside the college. According to Andrew his

replacement had experience in multiple student affairs functional areas and possessed multiple terminal degrees across several disciplines. Andrew left his institution in July 2021 and the field of higher education to take a position in business.

Dr. K

Of the five participants who indicated their age in the prompt sent prior to the second interview (Appendix E), Dr. K was the oldest self-identified participant at age 50. With 19 years of professional experience (since 2004), she had been at her current institution, a large, public institution in the southern region for 13 years. Prior to that she was involved in higher education but not in an administrative or student affairs role. Her education, training and background is vast and includes a Ph.D. and several certificates/certifications. Of all the participants, she is the only one who disclosed having faculty and teaching experience in addition to her service as an administrator in student affairs.

Dr. K accepted the interim Dean position in February 2022 after the person she replaced also moved to a different interim role at the same institution. She stated that having the former administrator nearby and readily accessible was beneficial because they could guide and support her in the new interim role. As of March 2024, Dr. K was still serving in her interim position. As the longest serving interim of the group, she described how her authority and decision-making had evolved over time. Dr. K reported receiving extra compensation for the interim role, and has received formal evaluations from her supervisor, but received no position description before taking the role.

Dr. K described how stepping into the interim role meant that everything increased; from the staff she supervised to the budget she commanded, to the demand for her time, presence, and participation in events and decision making. There was one notable aspect of Dr. K's interim

experience. Of all the participants, Dr. K was the only one who indicated that the interim role was not overly stressful. Not once in our interviews was stress mentioned.

Felipe

As a 36 years old male, Felipe was the second youngest professional interviewed for this study. With 12 years of professional experience at multiple large public institutions in the northeast and mid-Atlantic regions, he began working at his mid-sized, public institution in the Mid-Atlantic region in 2018. Most of his prior professional administrative roles involved a high degree of student contact where he would provide tailored and customized supportive resources to students. His career goal in the field involved advancing to higher positions with increasing responsibilities, especially surrounding staff supervision and duties/tasks, much like the duties of a Student Affairs Chief of Staff.

After being asked by his direct supervisor in August 2020, Felipe accepted an interim Associate Dean of Students role that lasted roughly 17 months. He received extra compensation for his interim role, and a position description was provided before taking the role. However, Felipe received no formal evaluation during or after serving in the role. Besides Dr. K, the participant who is still in their interim role, Felipe was in his interim role the longest of the other term interims. He described the interim role as “constantly changing” and was the most vocal of all the participants regarding the stress and frustration associated with the duties linked to the role. Although he reported having a high degree of support from his supervisor (the same person who offered him the role), when Felipe left his interim role in December 2021, he also left his institution and the field.

Jessica

At age 28, Jessica was not only the youngest participant interviewed, and she also had the least experience in higher education having only 2 years of professional experience at one mid-sized, public institution in the mid-Atlantic region prior to taking over her interim role. At the time of the beginning of pandemic, she worked in a small office under "Student Services." In July 2021 she began her interim role, working side-by-side with only one other student worker to keep day-to-day operations and engagement with both internal and external stakeholders operational. She served in her interim position for 10 months. A unique aspect of Jessica's interim experience was that she worked in a department where there were multiple interim employees at all levels, including deans, directors, and various support staff positions. These interims were all hired in close proximity to one another and were all learning about their new roles together. Additionally, working in an "office of one" had unique advantages and setbacks regarding her ability to make decisions, especially futuristic ones, and influenced how she could advocate for herself and the office.

When she left the interim role in April 2022, she stated that the interim experience was starting to hinder rather than add to her professional development. She ultimately ended up leaving the institution and the field. Jessica reported receiving extra compensation for the interim role but received no position description before taking the role or formal evaluation during or after serving in the role.

Lillian

Lillian, at the age of 39, spent her entire 17-year professional career in higher education in various Residence Life roles at multiple public and private mid-sized institutions in the mid-Atlantic and northeast. Prior to beginning her professional career at 22 as a live-in Area Director,

she was an undergraduate Resident Assistant at the same institution in the mid-Atlantic region. This live-in role eventually led to other roles in the northeast including an Assistant Director role at one institution, and Associate Director role at her interim institution before a departmental reorganization eliminated her role. She was then moved into an Assistant Dean role.

She worked at her current institution for 10 years before accepting an interim Associate Dean role that she held from February 2021 to February 2022. During this yearlong experience as a live-on staff member, Lillian described the impact COVID-19 had on the live-in staff members she supervised and her own live-on experience. Her college did not send students home during the pandemic, rather the students remained on campus with pandemic protocols in place. These protocols included residents, and staff members not having any visitors, and an ironclad testing and reporting system where failure to report for testing within 12 hours resulted in your access to housing being suspended. After being encouraged to apply for the permanent Associate Dean role, she was not extended an offer to fill the permanent position when it was posted; ultimately, the institution failed the search. This outcome ultimately led to Lillian accepting a different position in student affairs at the university. Lillian reported receiving extra compensation for the interim role but received no position description before taking the role or formal evaluation during or after serving in the role.

Liz

Liz, age 40, had 16 years of professional experience at ivy-league, and mid-sized private institutions in the northeast. Her prior experiences included leadership and Director roles in Fraternity and Sorority Life, Student Activities, and the Dean of Students Office. Liz had been at her current institution, a private mid-sized institution in the northeast, for only 3 years before being offered the interim VPSA role in February 2022. Her supervisor at the time offered her the

interim position and was a person she had worked with at a previous institution. At the time, her supervisor was also serving in an interim role at their new institution. Liz recounted how she was asked by her supervisor, stating that initially he just assumed that she had wanted the role and even floated the idea by others of asking Liz to in the role before officially asking and offering the role to her.

Liz spoke often about the initial stress of feeling like an imposter in the interim role and noted the ongoing day-to-day stress associated with the interim role. After serving in her interim position for almost a year, in January 2023 she was promoted to the position full-time. Liz reported receiving extra compensation for the interim role, and has received a formal evaluation from her supervisor, but received no position description before taking the role.

Louis

Louis was the most seasoned participant, describing a professional career path that spanned 26 years at multiple public, private, small, mid-sized, and large institutions across the northeast and mid-Atlantic regions. He had Multicultural, Residence Life, Orientation, Student Activities, and Dean of in Student Office experience. His prior experiences all had high degrees of student contact, engagement, and crisis.

He had been at the institution for 15 years when he was asked to step into the interim Dean role when the sitting dean left the institution. Even though the position was intended to last a few months, ultimately it extended to 10 months (July 2021–May 2022). In the interim role Louis spoke extensively about how his institution and department was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. There were daily struggles related to being perpetually short staffed, and having what little staff was available being exhausted from working 7 days a week. He recalled how, once members of his team started becoming disillusioned with the work they were doing, it led

to a series of resignations of people who he deeply cared for and respected. These individuals left to pursue other positions in higher education or simply left the field for jobs that were remote/work-from-home or offered better work/life balance.

His interim role ended after a new Dean was appointed, and Louis was the only participant who briefly returned to his previous role for six months. Louis described learning a lot from his failures while in the role, that ultimately led to him leaving the institution and accepting a similar Dean role at another institution. Louis reported receiving extra compensation for the interim role but received no position description before taking the role or formal evaluation during or after serving in the role.

Summary of Profiles

There were a wide range of differences between the participants regarding their work histories, career paths, professional time/exposure in the field, and level of education and training. For example, some of the professionals, including Andrew, Louis, and Lillian all possessed prior Housing/Residence Life experience. As previously indicated in Lillian's profile, compared to other student affairs functional areas, professionals in Residence Life oftentimes either live-in or live-on campus as a requisite of their role. While the participants did not go into more detail about their Residence Life experience and how it impacted their career development or their interim experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was an interesting observation that was unique to the seasoned professionals.

Another example of differences was having prior interim experience. Andrew and Lillian had indicated having been in interim roles before. I did not explore their prior interim roles because I did not want the participant reliving a prior interim experience that was not related to the study, and/or comparing it to the interim experience that occurred during the COVID-19

pandemic. In hindsight, following up on this piece of knowledge could have potentially provided additional valuable insight into their motivation for why they accepted another interim role and/or an interim role during the pandemic. Also, for Andrew, this could have provided context as to why he left the field after this last interim experience or may have explained why he had left the field of higher education at another point in his career.

Lastly, a third example specific to the seasoned participants pertained to the number of institutions where they have worked/served throughout their career. All the older professionals indicated prior employment at three or more institutions. The observations for the older professionals were all derived from responses gathered from the demographic questionnaires or briefly divulged by participants while explaining their career histories/pathways. It is worth mentioning these range of prior institutional experiences to simply showcase that the longer one remains in the field, the more likely they are to have a variety of diverse experiences such as prior Residence Life experience, interim experience, or roles at multiple institutions.

The varied backgrounds of the participants likely impacted their interim experiences. Yet, despite the differences in their interim experiences, there were similarities to note between all the participants. All seven participants accepted an interim leadership role at the Director, Dean, or VPSA level between March 2020–February 2022 after being asked by their supervisor. These interim roles were all a step-up from roles they were currently serving in at the institution. Lastly, all the interims reported receiving extra compensation for accepting the interim role, though some reported the amount of financial compensation fell short of expectations and had an impact on their interim experience. Table 1 showcases additional demographics of the participants and identifies the type of institution in which the interim role occurred.

Table 1

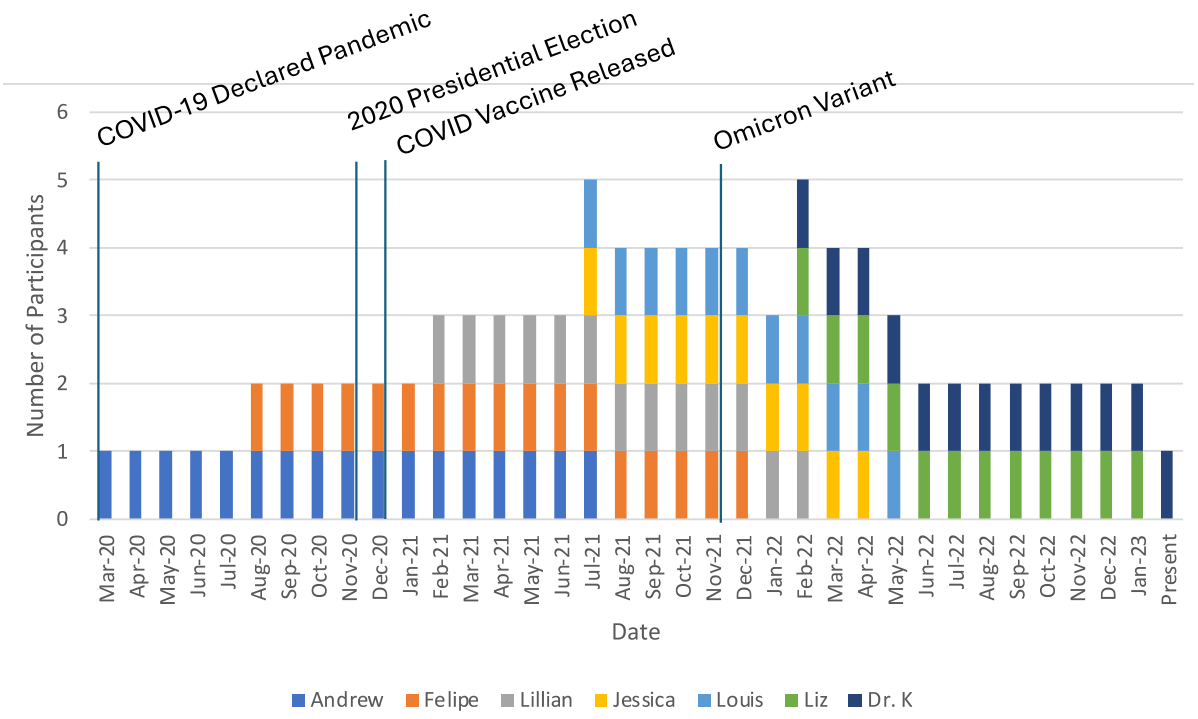
Additional Participant Demographics

Participant	Ethnicity	Institution Type
Andrew	Not Disclosed	4-Year Public
Dr. K	White	4-Year Public
Felipe	Persian	4-Year Public
Jessica	White	4-Year Public
Lillian	White	4-Year Private
Liz	White	4-Year Private
Louis	Not Disclosed	4-Year Public

Figure 1 shows the number of participants in interim roles over time. Note, given the various start and stop times of the seven participants, the greatest number of participants in interim roles occurred in July 2021 and February 2022. The shape emerging in this longitudinal tracking of those in interim roles follows a typical bell curve. The arc of the roles over time highlights two waves. The first wave begins in March 2020 and ends in April 2022, and the second wave begins in July 2021 and ends in the present. The overlapping waves indicate the timing of departures of the interims from their role and highlight how the participants faced different levels of ambiguity based on the status of the pandemic and other external events. More of the participants were tapped for interim roles the longer the pandemic went on, with the highest number serving between July 2021 and April 2022. This pattern highlights the fluctuating job market and employee situation the longer the effects of the pandemic were felt. Note the extra jump in time between January 2023 to present. That participant, Dr. K, is still in her interim role.

Figure 1

Number of Participants in Interim Roles Over Time



Findings

The next sections expand upon key findings for each of the research questions. The first finding highlights the participant narratives about their interim experience. These experiences include shared and differing experiences from the participants about what it was like to serve in an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the individual motivations for taking on the interim position are explored to see how these influenced the experiences of the participants while holding their interim roles.

The Interim Experience

One of the questions of this study was to learn the narrative stories of student affairs leaders who served in an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides the fact that two participants opted not to disclose certain demographic data, and one participant opted not to meet for the second interview, the narratives were robust. This claim is exemplified through several specific instances. Participants did not hold back on their opinions or information about their institution and/or department. For example, Liz shared context about the high degree of politics and politicking at her institution, citing multiple times throughout both of her interviews, the struggles of having to navigate through the senior level politics, calling it "tricky." Andrew provided context about how at his institution, there were noticeable inconsistencies with the work output between various directors and inequities between different offices. He recalled "I worked with amazing directors who were doing what they needed to do and with others who were just sustaining their work." Additionally, some offices at Andrew's institution were given resources they needed to move them forward while others were "treated like checkboxes." What remains unknown is if other campus members held similar perspectives like Liz and Andrew.

Felipe spoke extensively about how his institution responded to the pandemic and managed COVID-19 on campus. He stated:

> I think [it was] late August [2020] and when I came into this interim role, there was no intention of having any COVID specific policies, although we were having students come back to campus in a limited capacity that very first semester [Spring 2020], and I think I started the year with one set of expectations of, "hey, you're going to come into this role, this is what we're going to do. We're not going to have any COVID specific policies." And within a few weeks, UNC shut down, and Notre Dame shut down. Our president

> went on TV and promised we wouldn't shut down. And so, it was like, kind of felt like this arm or arms race of like, who can withstand COVID and not shut down and send students back home. It kind of felt like we got thrust into the middle of that and were pushed to implement some pretty hardcore strict policies that were very challenging to uphold.

Felipe spoke with candor about the shifting landscape emerging during COVID-19, especially regarding decisions to allow students to stay on campus or to change to remote/virtual learning options.

The candor of the participants extended to not holding back in the assessments they held of others, as they often listed by name, colleagues and/or supervisors who provided either positive support and/or supervision, or individuals who were toxic and damaging to their interim experience. For example, regarding supervision, Jessica, Felipe, and Liz were three interims who had vastly different supervisory experiences while in their interim role. Felipe provided narrative about having a supportive supervisor throughout his 17 months in the role. During our interview he stated twice that "my supervisor was very intentional with helping me to develop skills and experiences that would be helpful and pushing my career further, later down the road." Jessica provided an opposing narrative about her supervisor, who also accepted an interim leadership role within their functional area and remained as her supervisor. Jessica felt like "[my supervisor] maintained that perceived authority over the area. So, people would not defer to me on decisions or conversations, they would defer to the person who held the role previously." As a result, Jessica later stated that "towards the end, I was like, 'I just can't, I can't do this anymore. I can't be this,' like, I started to recognize that I had the capacity to do more, that was not being empowered to do more." Regardless of the type of experience they had in their interim role, I felt

the participants were open in sharing with me the full range of their experiences. Of course, it is difficult to ascertain the level of self-reflection they applied to critique their own role or actions while in their interim positions.

Liz did engage in some level of self-reflection as she recalled an experience with her supervisor, who was supportive, but also did something that Liz found incredibly frustrating. During our first interview she recalled:

> I knew my supervisor for a long time, and it was a casual and easy relationship. I was actually a little frustrated with this…that he essentially just assumed that I was going to be in the role. He said "Hey Liz, I need you here. This is where you're going to go." He had already floated the idea by others to calm their fears. One of the other directors sent me a text and was like "Are you ready" and I was like "What are you talking about?" so I was kinda tipped off.

In thinking of how her interim experience launched, Liz reflected on her surprise about her supervisor's unilateral approach to putting her in an interim role. On the one hand, Liz felt blindsided by having others know about the interim position and the presumed role she would have. On the other hand, her supervisor must have thought Liz able and prepared to take on the challenge.

Participants were also open with their feelings and reactions to certain processes, decisions, and outcomes that were either observed or experienced while in the interim role. Consider an example involving Lillian who, while serving as an interim Associate Dean in her department, was encouraged by her supervisor to apply for the permanent position that had been posted. Three applicants, one of whom was Lillian, were finalists in the candidate pool. One candidate stepped away from the search leaving only Lillian, who had been with the department

for 7 years, and one other candidate who was, according to Lillian, less qualified than her. Lillian recalled a conversation with her supervisor:

> [My supervisor] shared with me that she had thought long and hard about it, but she was failing the search. She just did not think that I was qualified for the position. I didn't have the experience and that they would probably wait until summer to sort of relaunch the search or maybe the fall. But would I stay on in the interim [position] anyway, and this was in April of 2021. And so that was actually really hard. Because I really just wanted to say, “fuck you.”

As evident in this example, interims were not automatically put into the permanent role when a search occurred. Lillian’s frustration reflects how she had been doing the job and felt ready, and to some extent her supervisor must have been satisfied with her performance to request that she stay on in the interim role despite not feeling Lillian was “qualified” for the position.

Consider how Dr. K’s experience provides a different perspective on her experiences as an interim. When asked about how the interim position has impacted her status on campus, she responded by stating:

> I think the answer is yes, my status has changed. And the people who I used to be friendly with I'm no longer friendly with simply because I'm now in an authoritarian position. So, you know, I don't get invited to the faculty things anymore. I don't go, and they still support each other. And I have a different group, which my group is less. My peer group, not the team, I supervise, but my peers like when I was in my faculty role, we were all very supportive of each other and were in each other's lives. And this new administration team, we're not in each other's lives. We're not collegial in that way. So that has been a big change. In fact, I talked with my supervisor that has since moved on

about the loneliness of the role. But I have since learned how to create my own little network and so it's worth it. I have that camaraderie now with a different group, not my not the other Associate Deans in my college but with other women leaders in my college. So, we've formed our own little group and support each other.

Role changes, even when interim, result in changes to relationships due to perceptions of different power levels embedded in the positions, based on hierarchy and processes, and based on different vantage points with administrators having a more macro view of the institution.

The interim positions also had impacts beyond the work environment. Louis also provided emotional detail about how the long workdays impacted his home/family life, stating that:

> I was not there for my family very much during those 10 months. I was not present at home very much. Even if I was sitting on the couch next to my wife, I'd be on email or managing something else. And so, she often said, “Can you turn off work? Can you? Can you focus on us for just a few minutes today?”

The all-encompassing theme of overwork and total dedication to the job was present for the interims during the pandemic.

The aforementioned examples provide just a snapshot of some of the perspectives from participants regarding their institutions, departments, supervisors, colleagues, and the spectrum of feelings and emotions experienced while in their interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost immediately, you may see similarities emerging with some of the narratives. These similarities turn into patterns, which ultimately turn into themes. The next section describes various commonalities between all the participants.

Shared Experiences. Each participant provided detailed narratives about their career path, permanent position prior to accepting the interim role, and experiences while in their interim role. Keeping in mind that the youngest participant had only two years of professional experience while the most seasoned had over 25, I assumed and expected that participants may not have much career, experience, or interim-role overlap. However, there were similar experiences that emerged to showcase that despite the vast degrees of individual differences between the participants, commonalities existed. These shared themes include views on compensation, being asked to serve in an interim role by their supervisor, and new supervisory and budgetary responsibilities.

***Compensation*.** As previously noted, all the participants received extra financial compensation while serving in their interim roles. Prior to each of the interviews with the participants, they had all indicated in the first demographic survey and confirmed in the interview if they had been financially compensated for serving in the interim role. All the participants answered in the affirmative, indicating that on varying levels they had received some kind of financial compensation for taking on the extra duties and responsibilities associated with the interim role. The amount of extra compensation varied from institution to institution. For example, Lillian stated that:

> We get a 10% bump. Anytime you go into an interim position, there's sort of a general practice that you get 10% for doing another job. So, in previous times, when my boss went out on maternity leave, I took over a number of her responsibilities. I think I ended up with like an 8% bump. And then the one person who took on like the 2% of hers also got a little bump. So, for a whole job, there's 10%. And then it can be split, depending on

> how the responsibilities are being, sort of distributed. But I got the full 10% for this [interim] position.

Some institutions have set amounts that individuals receive in additional compensation that avoids individual negotiation or differences based on the scope of the role. All but one of the participants provided me with additional context during their interview regarding their feelings about the compensation they received while in the interim role. The six who commented on their additional compensation all provided similar feedback about the amount of money they received. These comments spanned across men and women, new and seasoned professionals, and between public and private institutions. Their comments also varied in depth, with some being short while others being more descriptive.

Jessica provided the most succinct response, simply stating that "the compensation was not adequate." Louis and Felipe both used similar adjectives, stating respectively that "they only offered a tiny nugget of a raise" and "there was a little bit of salary increase." Felipe went on to say that "it wasn't really worth the amount of extra work that was going to be happening." Liz also noted her lackluster compensation, but unlike Louis and Felipe, her response had an added emotion as she stated, "I was disappointed." These participants felt their added compensation did not align with their added responsibilities. Andrew provided the most detailed feedback for his compensation, stating that:

> The only struggle was with how to compensate for the position. That was one of the issues I had, because the other individuals who they brought over for specific [interim] roles were compensated on a different scale. I'm doing my job plus others in my area, then, like, well, I'm making $10,000 to $15,000 less doing the same job while in this position. Like, how can you justify that? And, so, I did fight for that. And they did make,

they did make adjustments to help, which helped out. But it still was not to where I wanted it to be.

Similar to Andrew's statement about justifying the inequity in compensation, Lillian provided a similar, but shorter statement expressing that "I don't think I was fairly compensated." But unlike Andrew who fought for more, her institution had a strict policy limiting extra pay to 10% leaving Lillian with no room to maneuver.

All told, while all the interims indicated that they were financially compensated during their interim appointments, the sentiment was that the amount was not enough and fell short of their expectations for what they were or ended up doing while in the interim role. Implications for low compensation levels in interim roles are expanded upon in Chapter 5.

Being Asked by Supervisor. All the participants were asked to step into the interim role by their supervisor. In the first demographic survey participants were asked to select from a list of pre-selected options for how they entered the interim role. The options included: (a) Volunteering/applying; (b) Being asked to step into the role; (c) Being told by a supervisor they had to step into/fill the role; and (d) Other. All seven participants selected Option B, and later, I specifically asked each participant during their interview who had asked them to step into the interim role. All seven participants indicated that their current supervisor at the time, whether that person was the President of the institution, Dean, or Director of the department/division.

Most of the participants conveyed detailed narratives regarding the conversations that took place between them and their supervisor when the interim role was proposed. Despite the passage of time that occurred since the "ask" from the supervisor, which for Andrew was March 2020 to Liz and Dr. K in February 2022, and the interview with me, which were mostly in September 2023, participants were able to recall specific details regarding the conversation that

took place with their supervisor. Details on how each participant was asked to step into the role varied. For example, some conversations participants had with their supervisor were in-person, whereas some were in a telephone call or a Zoom call. All conversations were generally short in duration. Liz described the conversation she had with her supervisor as "brief" whereas Dr. K and Louis provided time estimates of their phone calls being, respectively, around 10 and 15 minutes.

Without much prompting from me, many participants also provided additional narrative and context about what happened after being asked, including factors they considered before accepting the role. Many recalled the specific questions they asked their supervisor pertaining to the duties they would be performing, the timeframe, and extra compensation. Also, about half of the participants provided narrative about "supportive statement(s)" their supervisor made during the "ask." For example, Dr. K recalled that:

> It was a phone call and a phone call in the evening, or maybe it was on a weekend. He said, "I'm moving into an interim position, I need my position filled, and I think you would do a great job, would you be interested?" And I said, "Yes, I'd be very interested." So, it was a short call… maybe 10 minutes. And then after that, we had lots of conversations about preparing for that, for that move.

Like Liz, Dr. K's supervisor made an assumption about moving her into the interim role before even asking her about the move. Liz's supervisor provided her with words of encouragement and a reason why she was the best fit. Liz reflected:

> It was a very brief conversation. I was told that I did good work, and that I have peoples' trust, and that there was a need to continue to provide stability through the pandemic. I asked for some time to think it over, and if there would be additional compensation.

The fact that the initial conversations asking the participants to take on the interim role were short also reflects the fast pace of decision-making during the COVID-19 crisis. At some point in the ask by the supervisor, comments were made about the participant's ability to handle the new interim role. Consider the way Jessica's supervisor conveyed their confidence that Jessica could take on the interim role. She reflected:

> I remember it was a Zoom call, and he said, well, "we've been thinking about this...and we think that you would be the best person to step into this position. You know this [work]. You know it here, and you have the experience. We think you would be the best fit; would you consider it?"

Thus, participants started their interim roles feeling like their supervisors saw something in their ability to assume the position.

After being asked to serve in an interim role, many of the participants recalled expressing an initial level of interest, and noted they had various follow-up questions. Sometimes these questions were answered, and other times not. Jessica commented:

> I do remember that there were questions. I had a lot that they were not able to answer at that time. Things that I just was concerned about from a professional development and personal standpoint, you know? What would be the title that I would be that I would have? Would it be interim, would it be acting? What is the purpose of me serving as an interim? Is it to just maintain the services that our office offers, or is it to develop strategy? I remember asking that question. And then I remembered asking if there would be any additional compensation for my responsibilities. The person asking me did not have answers at that time.

The uncertainty in entering the interim role was complicated by the uncertainties of the pandemic crisis.

Even though the participants asked some common questions about the potential interim, their reality differed once on the job. Several of the participants, specifically all three men, Andrew and Louis, and Felipe, spoke about the original length of time they were told the interim position would last, and the actual amount of time the position lasted being vastly different. Andrew had been told that the interim position was going to last about 6 months, but it lasted three times longer. Louis's term as interim also lasted 3 times longer than originally expected, exceeding 10 months rather than the expected three. At 17 months, Felipe was in his interim position for so long that his duties and responsibilities changed several times; leading to him thinking that his status as an interim had no end date.

In summary, all the participants were directly asked by their supervisors to step into the interim role and all the participants accepted the offer from their supervisors. The conversations between the participants and their supervisors took different approaches. Some supervisors used more supportive language and provided compelling reasons for why the participants were the best person for the job. Additionally, some of the supervisors were more prepared than others when asked questions about the role, expectations, and compensation. However, even when initial responses were provided, especially regarding the duration of the interim role, the response given to the participants ended up being vastly different.

***Supervision and Budgetary Responsibilities*.** Given that this study focused on interviewing Directors, Deans, and VPSAs, it was likely that supervision and budgetary duties were part of their interim roles. This role responsibility was confirmed with feedback from the initial demographic survey which directly asked participants if supervising and budgeting were

duties of their interim role. All seven participants responded in the affirmative. The reason and rationale for inquiring about these factors was twofold. First, I wanted to see how, if at all, their approach to supervision was affected during the pandemic. Was supervision a cause of stress and frustration? What did interims learn about themselves as a supervisor during a pandemic? Second, I wanted to see how, if at all, budgets were affected due to the pandemic. As the opening lines of this dissertation indicated, overall tuition dollars were impacted by a decrease in student enrollment. Did this decrease in revenue trickle down to the departmental level? Was it a cause of stress and frustration? The participants had mixed experiences with these two job factors. There were multiple narratives conveyed by the interims about how they supervised during the COVID-19 pandemic. Keeping in mind that internal employees filled the interim positions already within that particular functional area, some interims conveyed various struggles pertaining to new supervisory duties associated with the interim position. supervision.

One type of struggle came from interims who had no prior supervision experience before they assumed their interim role. Lillian recalled how:

> I did not supervise anyone in my Assistant Dean role. When I moved into the interim role of Associate Dean, I had a team of oh, gosh, I'm trying to think, I think at the time I went into the role, it was 10. It was supposed to be 12…we had a couple of vacancies when I went into the role. And so, at the time, I think I had 10.

Moving from no supervisory responsibilities to now supervising a large team was an adjustment and learning cure for Lillian. She commented that "it was an interesting transition" as moving out of her peer group into the supervisory role, she now had to supervise her previous peers including her best friend. She recalled:

> I mean, it was definitely tricky. I think, at that point, I was already seen as somewhat of a leader. I'd been there for a long time compared to most of the Area Directors. When I was moved into the interim role, I started supervising my best friend. So that was an interesting transition. Because we had we started off as Area Directors together, and we've sort of moved up in Res Ed together. And so, at the time, she was an Associate Director, I was an Assistant Dean, and we worked collaboratively all the time. And then all of a sudden, I was her supervisor. And then, I had another colleague that we literally started the same day together all the way back. He was also a Senior Area Director and Associate Director. He was very concerned. He actually had a conversation with me later where he was like, I was really worried about you coming in and being my boss. I wasn't excited about it. I didn't know how it was gonna go. But I think, like, we worked really well together.

While she described herself as an ally and champion for her staff, Lillian also had to quickly get comfortable with not being liked. In addition to some of the participants, such as Jessica and Felipe, having little to no prior supervisory experience, some experienced unexpected struggles when they moved into a new position within the same functional area. Jessica conveyed how her limited prior supervisory experience influenced her new role:

> I supervised undergraduate students as part of my role before but not professional staff. As Interim Director, I supervised a professional staff member and shared supervision with some of our administrative staff. It was a completely new experience!

Keeping in mind that Jessica worked in a small functional area within student affairs, she was faced with two new experiences pertaining to supervision, being a sole supervisor to one person

within her functional area but sharing supervision for administrative staff for other functional areas.

One interim in particular, Liz, struggled from self-doubt after noticing that she was one of the younger supervisors. In her narrative she stated that:

> Now, I think supervision and politics are sort of the trickiest pieces. But I think for me, coming in as the interim, and supervising was a lot of, you know, I know, people are pushing back on this term, but the imposter syndrome piece, like, all the folks who have been there had been there much longer, I was younger than all of them. But at the same time, I had a good relationship with each of them. And I think they were relieved that maybe Student Affairs was not being absorbed, let's say into enrollment or into academic affairs, where they would be sort of pushed down a bit. So that helped. But I think more of the supervision piece for me was all in my head of like, what is a good supervisor at this level?

Those earlier in their career had less experience, both in the field and with supervision and this backdrop resulted in self-doubt and feelings of imposter syndrome.

Lastly, supervision struggles came from assumptions that some of the interims held either before coming into the role or in the early stages of their experience. Jessica recounted:

> A situation I found myself in becoming interim director, and the abrupt addition of some temporarily reassigned staff that was just all very sudden. It was like, I got a call on a Friday that I'd have an employee on Monday, and it was like, figure it out as you go.

Like other outcomes, the pandemic resulted in a swirl of moving personnel around and the creation of new reporting lines.

Louis also described how even with having good previous relationships with all the members of the team in his functional area, he assumed that supervision was "going to be a small amount of time." Over the course of almost a year, he discovered he could not manage all the things that needed to be done.

Despite setbacks, failures, and assumptions, one of the participants, Andrew, noted his positive experience with supervision as an interim. Andrew, who again took over a large area (including the area he previously managed) and who also experienced no decline in budget, recounted his goal in the first few weeks as interim:

> For me, the first thing I wanted to know, was them you know? I wanted to understand their budget, what is needed, how I can support? And then, you know, I also laid out who I am as a supervisor, you know, as a leader and what my expectations are and how I can support you in a supervisory role.

Here, Andrew reflected how his experience was positive as he set out expectations for those reporting to him early on, which infers too that he was comfortable with his supervisory role.

When it came to newfound supervisory roles, narrative from most of the interims indicated a variety of struggles, including assumptions, lack of experience, or unique situational factors like having to supervise a former peer/colleague. However, many were also reflective and mindful of how their supervisory style impacted others. Andrew spoke to this matter as noted above, and Liz added more to this concept by stating that:

> Even today, I still ask myself, is this working? Is this structure or this meeting flow? Like, should I have these folks come together? Less more? I don't have a good answer on the supervision piece. Yep. And the funny thing is, I told the three of them, I said, I'm still figuring this out. If you all have ideas, let me know!

Liz took a learning approach to her leadership with respect to her supervisory role and looked for feedback from her supervisees as she reflected on improvements.

Budgeting was another factor that, according to the demographic survey, all participants indicated were job expectations while in the interim role. However, while all the interims indicated that budgeting was listed as core or essential duty of the interim role, narrative from the participants indicated otherwise. Two paths emerged from the narratives, those who performed budgeting duties and subsequently gained that knowledge and experience, and those who did not. Both findings are explored along with their implications.

Some of the interims had extensive budgeting responsibilities. Given their high-status leadership roles, this was not a surprising factor to see amongst their duties. However, there were some differences as to whether those who were highly involved in the budget even had the money and resources available. As previously noted, Andrew's budget was not affected. He was the only interim to state this fact clearly. However, Dr. K also provided insightful details about her budget. She noted in her interview that:

> I did some budgeting and management of workers primarily around student success. I had a couple of small budgetary fiscal responsibilities, and managed very small budgets, and in the new role I manage the entire college's academic budget, which is not as much as research and extension, but certainly a hefty amount. So, I went from a little budget to a very large budget. I just had a lot more I had to learn with the second role…my interim role, because it was just so much bigger. The budgets were bigger, the process was bigger, I had a lot more to learn.

Lillian also explained how she had access to multiple budgets in her role, stating that:

> I had my own budget, kind of like I had an allocation from our departmental budget that like I knew my training budget, and I knew some of those things. And so, I had sort of two lines underneath me. And then also, the budget for our department is like $1.4 million.

One aspect of learning more about managing budgets had to do with the scope of the budget funding and the number of functional areas the interim supervised.

However, narratives from some of the interims indicated having limited access and involvement with budgeting. Some of the younger participants, like Jessica, with only two years of professional experience, did not have any budgeting experience prior to stepping into the interim role. In her interview she stated that "budget responsibilities were new to me in the interim Director role. I knew of the budget but didn't have any budget planning or budget management responsibilities prior to becoming interim director." Jessica's limited knowledge did not result in learning more about budgeting, however, as her prior supervisor maintained control over her operational budget. Even without having direct control over the budget and expenditures, which admittedly still ran through her supervisor, she stated that when it came to looking at the budget, "it's like a curtain was pulled back. And I got to see some things I hadn't seen before." Jessica now possessed more knowledge about budgetary responsibilities even though she did not directly oversee her budget.

Felipe was another interim who, early in the interim role stated that when it came to the budget:

> I wasn't really touching that that functional area much outside of general oversight, you know, budgeting and like collecting, assessment information. And so, in the interim

> capacity, it was pretty new to me. There was…kind of two of us in interim roles there. I'd say in the interim capacity, the other person handled more of the budget than I did.

However, keeping in mind how long Felipe was in the interim role, this aspect changed. Later in the interview he recalled working with a new supervisor who was intentional with his development. Felipe added:

> Like, when I was in the interim role, there would be times where we would block out time to just sit down and review the departmental budget and learn. This is how this part works. That's how this part works. And this is why we request this money, and this is why we sell these items during these events and so on and so on.

Overall, despite budgeting being listed as an expectation of the role, interims had varying levels of involvement with their budgets. Most indicated that budgets remained somewhat untouched, and that even if they were not the person managing the budget, simply being exposed to the numbers/figures and learning what, why, and when things are purchased was still educational, informative, and beneficial.

Different Experiences. While the section above reviewed the shared experiences among the participants, this section explores their different experiences. As a quick reminder, the four female and three male participants were spread out across five public and two private institutions in the Northeast, mid-Atlantic, and South. These differences are bundled into five themes that apply to participants regardless of gender/sex, time in the field/experience level, or institutional type. Each of the five themes will be expanded upon and reinforced with appropriate and applicable quotes. Some of the themes mirror the participants' overall interim experience.

Emotionally Draining. One of the most predominant themes from participants were varying feelings of perpetual stress and exhaustion. Being in an overwhelming and hectic

environment resulted in participants being burned out by the work they were performing in their interim role. Participants cited several causes and sources of this stress during their interim roles that led to feeling emotionally drained almost daily.

The younger professionals felt more stress in their interim roles compared to the seasoned professionals. Felipe mentioned feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and exhausted ten times throughout his two interviews. He stated that:

> It was hectic. That was probably the best way to describe it. It was hectic and ever changing. I know it was a global pandemic and no one had been through that, and you know, we had to be nimble, and on our feet, but I don't think I realized how overwhelming and overbearing it was. I'm on edge. I'm stressed. I don't want to do this, like, I hate this. Why do I have to do this? Like, we were stressed, we were tired. We were perpetually on the clock. It felt like non-stop work around the clock, and I was constantly stressed out. I was getting angrier and angrier day by day, week by week, month by month.

Whether Felipe was talking about the job, the pandemic, or his own well-being, he was one of the most vocal participants who provided compelling narrative about how emotionally taxing the role was for him.

Lillian also spoke of stressors multiple times throughout her interviews. But unlike Felipe, she provided the most comprehensive narrative pertaining to the professional struggles she faced during the interim role and how those struggles reframed her career path after the interim role. While in her role she recounted a time where she had to adjust their on-call structure, stating that:

> We were so low staff at that point because we had I think two staff members leave in, like, October and November, that we have a two tiered on-call system. We have primaries and secondaries. And I made the call where I said, “everyone is going down to primary so that the phone burden is not so much a burden.” And I was secondary for two and a half months. Because we just didn't have the bandwidth. And so, it's like, that's a priority, and that has to happen. And so I was, you know, on the secondary rotation from I think, like November 2 to January 13, or something like that. And so, it was one of those things where none of these things do I get to say, “well, that's less of a priority; so, we'll put that on the backburner.” It was like everything had to happen. And it had to happen now. And it had to, we had to keep the wheels running. And so, I just felt like I was in overdrive the whole time.

Processes had to change given the stress of the role due to low staffing and high demand. Additionally, after her interim role, Lillian spoke frankly about how she used the stressors to decide her next steps and career path at the institution. She recalled:

> While I was in the interim role, I still had to be working at 150%, because I'm still doing two jobs, and we're still short staffed, and I still have people relying on me. But when I made that transition out of the interim role, it was almost like I was like, I have an opportunity to take a breath. Okay, I'm gonna give myself like two weeks to take a breath. And then I'm gonna go back into full steam ahead. And I never went back into full steam ahead. Because I sort of realized, that was crazy, right? And so, I think it really helped me to sort of like reframe my boundaries around work, redefine, also, like my therapist helped me with this a lot, too. But like, helped me sort of redefine what is good enough, what is good work?

Other than Lillian, none of the other participants mentioned going to therapy as a supportive measure. Putting in and redefining boundaries was a strategy for Lillian in coping with the emotionally draining aspect of work. Although others did reference their spouse/partner, it remains unclear who the participants confided in for emotional support during and after their interim experience.

The youngest professional, Jessica, provided a simple response regarding the stressors that impacted her decision to ultimately leave the institution and field. She recounted:

> I would say, you know, it was very high stress, like lots of additional responsibility during a time when everything was a little bit uncertain. So it was, it was definitely an abrupt transition. And just a lot, I would say, being an interim during the pandemic was just a lot. No real preparation because nobody could prepare, right? Like it was a pandemic, we didn't, we hadn't lived through this before. So, it was overwhelming. Overwhelming, that's the word that comes to mind.

Even with limited professional experience in the field her use of the word "we" instead of I highlights that even the seasoned professionals had not lived through this before.

The seasoned professionals, specifically Louis and Andrew, both mentioned feeling stressed several times throughout their interviews. But what made these utterances unique is that whereas the younger professionals spoke of how the stressors impacted themselves, the seasoned professionals spoke of their awareness of how the stressors impacted themselves and their teams/staffs. Andrew initially stated that "there's was lot of stress and frustration" but followed up by saying that "I would constantly ask, "how can I support you"? How do I show them that they are being supported and that we do care for them?" This other oriented leadership

perspective may reflect longer time in the field and a collective view of everyone being in a time of stress.

Louis also provided similar narrative pertaining to how working in a hectic and overwhelming environment during the pandemic impacted him and his team, stating that:

> Because of the pandemic, we were exhausted and had no energy. I would try to give them as much information and understanding about what they're going into and create concepts of success. I thought that I could remain focused on what I believed was important, and focused on ensuring that the team was well taken care of and had the tools and the resources that they needed to manage during the interim period.

Overall, the participants expressed a variety of emotions pertaining to feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and stressed. These factors succinctly described by Felipe as "constant and constantly changing" often led to an overall feeling of burnout that for some participants, led to their departure from the interim role, their institution, and the entire field. Feeling emotionally drained also impacted their overall health and wellness, and relationships, thus resulting in another theme.

Sacrifices. In addition to feeling stressed while at work, the participants noted the impact their interim roles had on their mental health, physical health, and relationships, to include family and friends. These sacrifices to their wellbeing were felt and experienced differently between men and women, young professionals and seasoned, and those who lived on or off-campus. Felipe, the youngest male professional, conveyed a comprehensive narrative of all the men on the adjustments he made to his schedule to accommodate the work. He recalled:

> I had no time for self-care. I wasn't taking care of myself whatsoever. I distinctly remember a time where we were so busy, I couldn't address email whatsoever during the

> workday. So, and you know, the workday and we're working from home a lot. And so the workday might go to 10 p.m.. I remember one point, I had decided, “Okay, the best way for me to do this is I'll just go to sleep. And I'll wake up really early, like 3 a.m. And I can work on the emails from 3 to 5 and then 6 to 7. I can just like relax for like an hour. And then like 7, I can start getting ready for the workday.” I remember I decided to do that, and I did it for a little while. And one time I did it. I sent an email at 3 a.m. My supervisor was copied on it. And I got an immediate email back from my supervisor saying get off your email. “Why are you on email at this moment?” Which just like that, raised my bell of like, “you're on your email at 3 a.m., too”!

Felipe’s experience was a prime example of a time where, not only was he not taking good care of himself, but his supervisor was not taking care of himself, either. The workday had no beginning or end and resulted in a sacrifice of any semblance of a life outside of work.

In Felipe’s second interview, he provided additional narrative about the toll the interim role had on his mental health, stating that:

> And there is the worst of it all is that there, there seemed to be less and less concern about the well-being and mental health and just how staff were doing, then then students and students are the most important thing I know. But we're not robots.

The demands on student affairs professionals during the pandemic increased due to the nature of the pandemic and due to the loss of staff. The remaining staff endured a range of sacrifices to help keep colleges and universities open for students.

In his only interview, Andrew provided narrative about his greatest “takeaway” from being in the interim role, commenting that:

> So, the one thing about it is something that I always kind of really think about is what it does to your mental health. And when you are working so hard for an institution that you don't really provide yourself with the space. You're working so hard…you don't take vacation or days off. And you don't do it because you don't do it. Because it's just, you know, you feel that you're obligated…in the back of your mind, you have something to do you know? People need you.

This narrative showcases the selflessness that some participants such as Andrew endured while in the role. Andrew was also one of the three participants who after stepping away from the interim role, left the field. The amount of sacrifice required proved a tipping point for these student affairs professionals.

The sacrifices participants made themselves and to their families, including spouses and children, friends, and their colleagues/team-members was apparent. Participants referenced long hours, unpredictable schedules, and the duties associated with their interim roles as factors linked to these sacrifices. These sacrifices, which included concepts of loss, and regret, inflicted a heavy toll on the participants. For example, previously, Louis recounted how the long work hours impacted his home life, especially with his wife who asked him to focus on them, even for just 5 minutes. He added additional perspective when it came to managing his team, stating that "I can suck it up and do it. I need to show my team that I can sacrifice too, because they all have so that's kind of the roller coaster of emotion that you go through." Leaders are role models, and Louis sought to provide by his own example that he too was giving his all to work, yet as the example provided by Felipe illustrates, the notion of being on call and at work 24/7 reinforced untenable demands on all staff.

Similarly, in an effort to not only be there for his team but also leave a legacy at his institution, Andrew spoke, rather emotionally, about how during his time as in interim, his engagement dissolved, recalling that:

> I was so enthralled in trying to create something and create a legacy that I lost, like, literally, I end up having…I was in a relationship for 14 years…engaged, I think that fell [by] the wayside. And not because there were [relationship] problems.

Andrew addressed how the sacrifices made in his interim role during the pandemic had life consequences. Like Andrew, Felipe also provided rather emotional narrative, and delivered an exemplary narrative that spoke to the concept of regret stating that:

> I have a lot of regret about not having the time to dedicate to spending more time with my family. I got married during that time as well. And a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, was going on. I lost a really close family member during that time and didn't really even have time to fully process, like all of that, you know? I really, really regretted not having more opportunity to spend more time with them when they were around.

Although the men, two of who (Andrew and Louis) were more seasoned were more vocal than the women about the sacrifices they endured, the "live-on" role Lillian held highlights sacrifice too. Lillian, who was also married and had just recently given birth during the pandemic, recounted how she was impacted. She stated:

> Well, you can't have visitors in the dorms, you know, because it's COVID. And you know, for me personally, I had a baby in June of 2020. So, prior to coming into the interim position, I had a baby in the middle of a pandemic. And I wasn't able to have any visitors to come and help me with a newborn, right? So, like, my parents couldn't come, my family couldn't come. And so, it was like this. This is what it is.

Lillian also provided context and an awareness about the sacrifices she made and how, in the end, her schedule and routine was just sustainable over a long period of time. She recalled:

> Like, you shouldn't have been working 9 to 5, making dinner for your family, getting your kid to bed, and then getting back on email until 11. And then waking up at 6 a.m. to do it all over again. Like, that's not sustainable. And that's like, that's just crazy, right? That's just not a thing that you should be doing. And you don't have to do that to do good work. Right?

Her narratives showcase a unique perspective that is specific to live-on professionals. Given that her workplace is also her home, she was bound by rules, regulations, and policies set forth by her institution.

Overall, the men provided more narrative compared to women on the sacrifices they endured while in their interim roles. The voicing of sacrifices by the men more than women counters COVID research that documented the more severe impact of the pandemic on women relative to men (cite). The range sacrifices the participants experienced, which included concepts of loss and regret, inflicted heavy tolls on the participants and their families.

Fear. Keeping in mind that the pandemic created unpredictable environments both inside and outside of higher education, the participants noted varying levels of fear and pressure where they felt like they were not prepared or in control. These feelings were accompanied by feelings of doubt, failure, being afraid to fail, or feeling like an imposture in their role. One of the most common narratives recounted by participants pertained to how prepared, or not, their institution was when responding to the pandemic. Narrative from the participants indicated some institutions started the Fall 2020 semester with COVID-19 policies and procedures, especially

conduct/judicial policies, already in place while others did not. Andrew struggled with how to prepare for students and staff returning to campus, stating that:

> I was developing proposals and plans, return to school plans [in Fall 2020], returning to normalcy plans, you know, returning, you know, looking at that, you know, predictive budgeting really looking at, you know, looking at looking ahead to see where we are, what we're going to need, knowing that coming back, there's going to be a lot of apprehension for students to come back to campuses. We also had to face the vaccine mandates for our students and employees. So that became a hot topic. So really trying to figure out what does that mean?

Whereas Andrew spent time being predictive and developing policies in anticipation of students and staff coming back to campus, Felipe's institution initially started the Fall 2020 semester without any COVID-19 measures in place and the campus had to quickly adapt and develop strict measures after students had already arrived on campus. He recounted:

> This started, probably around August 2020, and COVID hit March 2020. But let's think about it that spring semester when COVID hit, everybody went home, and they weren't on campus. And I think, I think late August, there was no intention of having any COVID specific policies. I think, I started the role with one set of expectations of, "hey, you're going to come into this role, this is what we're going to do, we're not going to have any COVID specific policies." Then, we got thrust into the middle of that and pushed to implement some pretty hardcore strict policies that were very challenging to uphold.

Many campuses had evolving policies as the pandemic went on, with some more formalized initially, some more rigid, and some more flexible.

Like Felipe, Louis provided narrative about the policies that were put into place at his institution and went a step further to outline how those policies impacted the staff who were expected to uphold them. He explained how:

> At the same time, we created a system related to student behavior that didn't have options for due process that didn't have options for failure. And I think translating all of that into everything that we were doing, that we sort of set ourselves up for failure. As a result, more employees became disillusioned with our work in relation to conduct and our work in relation to how we were adjudicating the obstacles and behavior in the residence halls when there was like a zero-tolerance policy.

Some of the strict policies emerging when students returned to campus ignored the developmental stages of college students, who will make mistakes. Without a means to address the failures in behavior, students and staff suffered consequences.

As the only live-on staff member, Lillian provided a unique perspective on the measures that her institution took to ensure the health and safety of its residential population. She explained how:

> At the same time, we had all of these COVID protocol things that were happening. So, our school required surveillance testing…everyone had to test twice a week. And we had to do daily attestations in an app that was then connected to one's housing access. So, if you didn't a test, or if you missed by, I think it was like 12 hours, if you were like, 12 hours late on getting your test, then your housing would shut, your housing access would shut off. And you would have to call a number so that they could keep people sort of in compliance, right? And so, we were also dealing with like, that whole system. And I was trying to sort of say, I am a user of the system as a campus, whereas I was on the team

> that was managing that system…I was the only campus resident. And so, I was also trying to like help say, like, "this is how it is working. This is how it isn't working. This is what's effective. This is what isn't effective." We're collecting all this data. So, we would get a report every morning. We had an 830-person crew, where there were a couple of us who would get all of the COVID numbers for the campus residences. And we would have to put them into like, charts and graphs for the vice-chancellor. And so, we're passing on all of that. So that was like, we have to do this every morning by 9 a.m.

Of all the participants and the only live-on participant, Lillian appeared to be the most connected to day-to-day matters regarding testing and reporting for the residential students. While she recognized the importance of her role, there was little room for error with her reports and reporting to the vice-chancellor as these reports guided policy.

Liz, who often reiterated the political environment at her institution, also mentioned how, at first, coming into a new role as a younger professional manifested a lot of emotions and doubt. She recalled:

> I think supervision and politics are sort of the trickiest pieces. But I think for me, coming in as the interim, and supervising was a lot of, you know, I know, people are pushing back on this term, but the imposter syndrome piece, like, all the folks who have been there had been there much longer, I was younger than all of them…"Should I really be here?"...But at the same time, I had a good relationship with each of them.

The concept of not being in control or feeling like they have control or authority was also a salient fear among the participants. This resulted in participants feeling frustrated, scared, uncertain, and powerless in their interim roles. However, there were differences in narratives between men and women, especially related to their concept of power. When I initially asked

participants about the power they had in their roles, I did not provide a definition of power, leaving it up to them whether to ask for one or to simply interpret the concept for themselves when responding. None of the participants ever asked for the definition or context. While in their interim roles, which again had supervisory and budgetary responsibilities, Felipe and Louis both provided concise narratives, simply stating, respectively, that "it felt like I had very little control over things" and "it was never about the power…I don't know power. But to me, it was about holding things together." These examples highlight how these participants saw control as power.

Whereas some of the male participants felt like they did not have power, most of the female participants felt the opposite, often stating that they did not realize how much power they actually had in their interim role. This finding was also paired with managing the politics of their institution. Women felt like they had power, but also had to navigate through institutional politics, too.

Lillian provided the best example of having to navigate through the politics at her institution, citing repeatedly in our interviews that "my institution is very political. I had to do some politicking and negotiating to not just fall back into what I was doing, and to be able to keep some of, you know, what I had stepped up into." Later in the interview, she added that despite being in the role and working on relationships with others, there were times where she recognized that, while in the role, "You know, I can't fix this. I just didn't have the political capital to be starting that because my institution is so political." The culture of the institution influenced how comfortable or fearful participants felt and how they felt supported in their interim roles.

Liz, who previously stated the supervision and politics were the trickiest pieces of the interim role provided similar narrative about the importance of having good relationships to

manage politics, stating that:

> I probably had the authority I needed all along. In fact, I probably had, due to my relationship with a president more authority than I used because I was very cautious not to rely on the President. So, I probably had I think I had the authority all along. I think I probably didn't know how to use it. Because I think again, stepping into an interim role. there wasn't coaching, there wasn't, hey, here's how you learn how to navigate some of these things. And I probably would have stayed in that role that that other role, like I could have been happy staying in that role, like, you know, three to five years, who knows? To actually get used to some of those sort of more senior-level politics and working with folks.

The political nature of leadership added to the levels of fear and uncertainty felt by the participants. Regardless of their level of experience, the participants noted their fear of failure.

Finally, while Jessica provided the briefest narrative, it was also the most longitudinal. Early in the role, she cited that "I had more power then I knew or thought at the time" but that over time, the power she thought she had was not actually there, and that despite her attempts to "create my own power by working closely with collaborators, I wasn't able to make key decisions. After a while, it was starting to hinder my professional development." Again, fear and power were intertwined, as perceptions of power provided a means to combat the fear participants held.

Overall, participants had varying experiences with feelings of failure, not feeling in control, or feeling like an imposture. There were some differences between sexes with men expressing more instances of feelings of failure and less control compared to women. Other

salient factors mentioned include being prepared, and having stress associated with these feelings.

Professional Development. Participants noted that their interim experience had an impact on their overall professional development. This impact spanned across a spectrum, with some participants expressing positive and favorable impacts on their professional development, while others, such as Jessica, indicating that after a while there was essentially a point of diminished returns as she felt she was no longer benefiting professionally as the interim role continued. Additionally, participants provided narrative not just on their professional development about new skills and opportunities, but also to the nature of how relationships with others at their institution changed.

All the women, Liz, Dr. K, Jessica, Lillian, and one man, Felipe, indicated that the interim experience was highly beneficial to their professional development. They noted often that their interim role provided an opportunity for them to grow and learn. Lillian provided the most comprehensive narrative of this growth and development, citing that "It helped me to grow my knowledge of my institution," and she added that "I saw this as like a great opportunity for me professionally as a way to showcase that I can do this position." When asked in a follow-up question about what she as able to showcase, Lillian indicated her felt she developed her supervisory skills, citing that:

> It [the interim position] forced me to get comfortable with not being liked. And that is something that I was always able to sort of position myself as like, I'm an ally, I'm a champion, I can be your cheerleader, I can do all those great things…But now that I'm in a supervisory role, sometimes I have to tell you to cut the shit. And you're not gonna like

> that, you know, and I had to get really comfortable with that. And that was a stretch for me, but it was a great growth opportunity for me.

Advancing to supervisory roles requires seeing a more macro view of the institution. This perspective changes how individuals work together. Whereas Lillian had given thought to how the interim experience could benefit her growth before accepting the role, Jessica's narrative was the opposite, indicating that "I can look back on it now and recognize that there was lots of learning and opportunity for growth throughout the 11-month experience." Considering that Jessica ended up leaving her interim role, her institution, and the field, thinking about this development before an interim opportunity, rather than during or after.

Liz conveyed a unique narrative on how the interim role was beneficial because it provided her with experience and opportunity to explore professional/career options. When asked about how her development was connected to her previous comment about being an imposture, she commented that:

> Ah, yes, I did have the authority to sort of step in and lead and sort of just kind of being taken seriously in that way. Which I think last time I spoke a little bit about some of the impostor syndrome piece there, too. Which is so it's interesting for me because perhaps ultimately that may have been it, right? Because I was feeling like I wasn't maybe right for the role or shouldn't be in it or too soon or whatnot. I would say, you know, so long as you don't think you're being set up to fail or you're being scapegoated, or there's not any sort of weird bad things there. Step into the role, use it as an opportunity just to decide if you actually would even really want the role moving forward.

Reflection provided Liz a way to reconcile feeling like an imposter and also her feeling of professional development in her role. Dr. K also provided brief narrative on her development,

stating that:

> I felt like it was a gift. It was a gift to be able to move into this role, I have had an opportunity to grow and learn and jump two feet first into a leadership role that many, many people wait longer than I've had to. So that's been, in many ways, a gift.

Looking at the professional growth received for some of the participants provides a way to think about what motivated them in their new roles.

The one male participant, Felipe, who commented on the positive professional development occurring due to the interim role held a narrative similar to Lillian. Felipe recounted that:

> The interim role was a way to grow and set myself up for continuing to climb the ladder. There just has to be some room to grow professionally. One of my biggest fears is to just be like, stagnated and stuck in a specific type of role.

As previously noted, in addition to growing and learning new skills, professional development also included expanding their networks and relationships with others. Many of the younger professionals, including Lillian, Liz, and Felipe, mentioned the importance of establishing, fostering, and maintaining relationships with their supervisees, peers, supervisor, and "senior leadership" at their institutions.

For example, Felipe provided narrative on his relationships, initially stating that "I like to build relationships with people in our department, people external to our department, and people across campus." Later, he added "one of my favorite aspects of my job before taking on the interim role was building relationships with people. It was not in my position description, but I loved it. I needed to do it." Thus, some of the professional growth experienced came from building a network on campus.

Next, while Liz had previously mentioned feelings of imposter syndrome for being the youngest professional in the room, she added that "I had a good relationship with each of them." Additionally, Liz knew who she needed to develop and foster meaningful relationships with at her institution to be successful in the role. Later in the interview, while talking about the outcomes from her dedicated relationship-building, she stated that "my relationship with the provost was really good!" Without formal professional development for their interim roles, the participants noted how their on-the-job work contributed to their growth as the position literally put them in a different circle on campus. Consider Lillian who commented that "it [the interim role] gave me opportunities to build relationships with people that I otherwise maybe would not have had the opportunity to. So, I definitely still see the benefits of having been in that role." Physically being at the leadership table provided a learning opportunity for the participants.

In summary, several participants, especially the younger professionals, spoke plainly about using their interim role to expand their professional development. This expansion included not only skills they could learn and apply to their future careers, but also with relationships and networks. However, as indicated by a few participants, there was a point where they realized the interim role was not "paying off" how they expected. Thus, the impact of their interim experience on their professional development was connected to the last finding of the study, the outcome of the interim experience. After the interim role, where did participants go, and would they ever accept another interim role ever again?

Outcome of Interim Role. The participants conveyed a variety of narratives on the outcome of their interim experiences. Three participants, Andrew, Felipe, and Jesscia left the field. One participant took a new/different role at the same institution, and another took a new/different role at a different institution. One was promoted to the role permanently, and the

last is still in the interim role. Many of the aforementioned findings about the interim experience impacted the decisions on whether to leave or stay at their institution or the field. Additionally, the participants had vastly different responses to whether they would ever serve in interim role ever again. Whereas all the women and one of the men indicated a willingness to ever serve in an interim role every again, both participants who answered in the negative, Andrew and Louis, were seasoned men. Their responses were some of the shortest of all the interviews, both simply stating that "No, I'd never do it again." For both participants, one ended up leaving the field entirely while the other left his institution and accepted a leadership role at another institution. The remaining participants provided narrative pertaining to serving again, and what they would need to know and consider before accepting.

For the remaining five participants, Dr. K, Felipe, Jessica, Lillian, and Liz, when asked if they would ever serve in another interim role if the opportunity ever presented itself again, all answered in the affirmative, reiterating the opportunity to grow as a professional. They did, however, provided various criteria and information they would need prior to considering and accepting the role. For example, Dr. K provided the briefest remarks, stating that "I would want a timeline and assurances that things could proceed within that timeline." Considering that Dr. K is the only interim still serving in her interim role, this response was not surprising as there was no ending timeline for the position. Liz provided a similar response about a timeline, stating that:

> I think I definitely would, in fact, the idea that, you know, they have those folks that will come in and just serve as interim folks. I actually think that that is really, for me now looking back that that could be eventually like a really interesting role because you can sort of be the healer between some things or you can keep things calm. And so you can take hits if you need to, or you can come in and help really rebuild. So I think one thing I

> would want to know what are the what are the goals for the interim? Right? For sure. So I would be more clear about that upfront. And what is the real length of the role? So mine extended a couple of times and I was part of those conversations, which was good, but the length of it through of what could be and then ultimately, like are there landmines are there this is a term that can sometimes sacred cows know about. I think I would, I would do another interim role. It was an interesting experience.

Her statements about being a "healer interim" who keeps things calm and rebuilds the organization correspond to a specific type of interim that aligned with the literature in Chapter 2 This healer role also conveys a limited and targeted time for the length of the position prior to hiring a replacement.

While Jessica and Lillian both indicated a willingness to serve again, both provided unique comments about the value of simply being asked. Jessica stated that:

> I would take on an interim role again. I've learned a few things. I know what questions to ask. Just being asked to fill the interim role is and was incredibly meaningful. They need you, and they asked you. That should have informed me what to ask them about the interim role. Next time, I will be prepared when asking about what the role will entail, or what it won't entail.

Lillian conveyed a similar narrative about the excitement of simply being asked. She recounted that:

> I would definitely consider it. I think it would really depend on the role. It would depend on the timing. I think, you know, the, when I was first offered the interim role, there was no way I was saying no, I was like, I knew it was coming before it even came. And I was

like, I'm so excited to be taking this and my partner was like, Are you gonna get a pay bump? I was like, “I don't know, I don't care.”

Like other narratives, Lillian said that “I would ask a lot more questions.” She also stated repeatedly that “I did, I did benefit. You know, I feel like I keep saying this. I did benefit a lot professionally.” The last notable part of Lillian’s narrative pertained to what she would do after the interim role ended. Lillian was the only participant to provide narrative, stating that “and what does it look like when this interim period is over? Right? Will I be getting any additional responsibilities after the fact? Is there potential, you know, for that conversation?” The outcomes of the interim positions often tied to the beginnings of how participants were asked, how the goals of the position, and ultimately how the position evolved.

Felipe was the only man to indicate that he would accept another interim role. Like Lillian, he mentioned benefiting from the role and growing, but as previously noted, included fears of being stuck in a role with no growth. He stated: “I would love to tell you, no, I would never do this again. But I probably would do it again in a heartbeat. So, the direct answer to your question is, I'd probably do it again.” The participants who found professional growth and value within their interim role were inclined to say they would do it again. Louis and Andrew both left their initial institution, and while they noted value in their interim role indicated they would not seek another interim position given their prior interim experience.

Summary of Experiences. The narrative stories from those who served in an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic have added depth and breadth to address the first research question which sought to obtain perspectives from student affairs practitioners. The participants all had different career paths, and life experiences before, during, and after their interim roles. Despite these differences, they shared experiences like how they were asked to be the interim,

and with budgetary and supervisory responsibilities. There were also a variety of differing experiences between the participants, which included sacrifices to their wellness, fear, and changes to their professional development. These differences show various levels of interconnectedness between the interims and their experiences that is discussed more in Chapter 5. Understanding more about individual motivators helps contextualize the experiences related by the participants.

Individual Motivators

The second research question explored the individual motivators for why each of the participants decided to accept an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked this specific question about motivations to each participant two times, once during the first interview, and once during the second interview. During the first interview participants were asked to explain some of their motivators for why they accepted the role. No prompts or references to McClelland's model were mentioned at this point, although questions pertaining to their sense of power, achievements, and accomplishments while in the interim role were asked during the first interview.

Then, prior to the second interview, all participants were provided with a prompt question (Appendix E) specifically asking them which of McClelland's motivations (achievement, power, or affiliation) they most aligned and identified with for why they accepted their interim role. I provided them with brief descriptions for each of the motivators to aid in their decision-making. In the event participants felt like they did not resonate with any of the motivators listed, the option of "None of these describe my motivation for accepting the interim role" was also included. I used their responses to formulate some follow-up questions for our second interview.

The following sections explore how each of the seven participants responded to these questions. Narrative from the first interview pertaining to motivators, their self-selected McClelland motivator from the prompt, and narrative from their second interview is included. There is one brief point to note before proceeding with these findings. Keeping in mind that Andrew opted not to meet for the second interview, his self-selected McClelland motivator and narrative are unavailable. However, enough narrative was collected from the first interview to indicate alignment of his motivations with a particular motivator. Overall, the motivator of achievement was mentioned specifically by four of the participants. When I include Andrew's narrative, the number increases to five. One participant selected power, and one participant did not select any of McClelland's motivators. I will begin with the most popular motivator first, followed by power, and the participant who selected none. Lastly, while no one selected affiliation as a motivator, I will showcase some narrative statements from participants that align with this motivator.

Achievement. As previously mentioned, this motivator can broadly be defined as doing something successfully, accomplishing something difficult, finding solutions to problems, and achieving goals. The following five participants all indicated through their interview(s) and prompts that achievement was their primary motivator for accepting the interim role. Findings regarding this motivator from each of the participants, listed alphabetically, is provided.

***Andrew*.** Recalling that Andrew only participated in the first interview, his prompt response and narrative from the second interview are not available. Throughout his interview Andrew mentioned concepts of authority and relationships, which track with the motivators of power and affiliation, although these motivating factors do not appear to be the primary reason

for why he accepted the interim role. For example, Andrew provided narrative pertaining to his use of power as a supervisor while in the interim role, citing that:

> If I'm a supervisor, and I'm looking at my people working, I'm gonna be like, I was doing it for my people. But I wasn't doing it for myself, you know? And so, those are things that you know, you know? Maybe shame on me for not recognizing things, but it would have been great for the institutions to understand that as well.

Andrew identified his use of power in getting his staff to accomplish the tasks they needed to do, yet the act of supervision was not why he accepted the position. He said the reason he said yes to the opportunity was because his supervisor, the president, had some trust in his leadership ability.

Additionally, Andrew provided narrative about the importance of relationships and listening to his team. Again, while these provide some insight, it was not until directly asked about his motivations, and his corresponding responses that pertain to accomplishments and problem solving that showcase where Andrew's achievement motivators become obvious. He provided two responses when asked about his motivators:

> Impact! I really think, I think two things. Part of it was to help students. I want them to know that we're there. The other part was a challenge. I wanted the challenge for myself. I feel like there's something big for me, like, you know, I mean, like, there's just, and I don't know what that means, necessarily, doesn't mean compensation or fame, or, you know, changing the game or changing the outlook, but I just feel like, education is just a space where I think we have such old traditions and such new innovations, and we just haven't found a way to synergize it. And I think that there's an opportunity to, there's an

> opportunity to really, you know, to make an impact in those spaces. And I feel like I'm a person that can do that.

Despite not self-selecting an option, achieving things for himself and others appears to be the primary motivator for why he accepted the role and continued to serve despite the previous narratives citing lackluster compensation and service in the interim position past what was forecasted.

Felipe. Between his interviews and the specific prompt about his motivations, Felipe provided comprehensive narratives about his motivations. His responses often crossed all three motivations, sometimes while responding to one question. For example, when asked about his accomplishments in the interim role, he replied that:

> I think an early accomplishment for me was just the ability to do things differently. Then we developed all these COVID policies, quickly and successfully. One other, I guess, like pride proud moment was just the ability to be a part of a team and foster a community amongst a team when you were handed the world's most challenging, you know, stuff, and being able to find some bonding and resiliency in that with our team members.

While these responses add insight into the unique challenges Felipe faced at his institution, his response during the first interview as to why he accepted the role paints a clearer picture. He stated:

> I wanted to grow in my career. I had been in my role for two years, and I thought it was a great stepping-stone to show leadership and move up. Unfortunately, in the higher-ed space, you know, there's millions of there's millions of like, Residence Hall Director openings, right, but there is only one Director of Residence Life at every institution. There's probably what, six to 10 like residence hall directors or something, and there's

> only one Director of Residence Life. Again, I didn't want to work in residence life, but the same applies across the board for all the other departments. There's one, Vice President Student Affairs, there's one Dean of Students. And oftentimes those positions don't become available until somebody retires or they pass away or, or they leave for another job. And then you're competing with everyone out in the whole world, and also people at your institution that have been there 15 years, 20 years. At the point where I started at, at this institution, I was about, like seven years into my career. And pretty much had only held like entry level roles was really dying to get some supervisory experience, I had been begging supervisors in the past to give me supervisory experience. And this was the only like, time that I had a supervisor that like really was like, "Okay, I will try to find a way to get you some." And so, the motivation was the growth, the ability to push my career further and gain some more experiences that I think would make me more marketable in the Student Affairs world.

Clearly, achievement was a motivator for Felipe. During the second interview, Felipe was able to add context as to why he self-selected achievement as his primary motivator, along with reasoning as to why the other motivators were considered and ruled out, or simply ruled out. His responses for selecting achievement were remarkably similar to his responses in the first interview where he was seeking opportunity and experience.

> Yeah, that one, I think achievement stuck out specifically. Because my, my goal was always to grow and to set myself up for continuing to climb the ladder. Professionally, I just thought it was a great opportunity to learn about another aspect of higher ed. Another aspect of Student Affairs, and I thought that the challenge, you know, overcoming this challenge would put me in a better place to be able to market myself better in the future

> in terms of career growth and everything. And so, I had also been looking for leadership opportunities and being able to supervise folks like my whole career, and almost no one would ever give me that opportunity. And this included some of that. And yeah, that was probably the largest motivator was, hey, this is a challenge. It's something that is going to push me and force me to grow. It's going to give me skills that I don't have, it's going to make me more marketable in the future. Yeah, I'd say like the affiliation aspect was probably the least the least motivating. The power dynamic piece, you know, just the way that's phrased, it makes me want to say no, it was never about me having more power. But it kind of is, right? It's, it's about, it's about having that leadership role, and then being able to prove that, like, "Hey, I was able to figure things out here." And, and part of that, again, like I mentioned earlier was is that I had almost my whole career had been kind of begging supervisors, let me supervise student staff, let me supervise somebody, like give me some experience in doing this, because I want to be able to have that experience.

Like Andrew, Felipe spoke passionately about accepting the challenge associated with the interim role. Keeping in mind that part of achievement can also include failure, it is worth noting that both Andrew and Felipe were the two men who both left their interim roles, their institutions, and the field.

Jessica. Despite only having two years of professional experience in her position prior to accepting the interim role, Jessica conveyed a number of accomplishments in that timeframe. She spoke candidly stating that: "I think I had some big wins in the interim role, I think that I was really able to advocate for more staff in our office." Like Felipe, she spoke about successfully being able to gain experience, especially political experience, recalling that:

> I gained a lot of capital during that timeframe, because I was able to make connections and, and really become a point of contact for lots of people like the president's office knows that they can send someone my way.

During the first interview, Jessica provided a very straightforward response when asked why she ended up accepting the interim role. Keeping in mind that she worked in a small office she was cognizant of the situation, citing that:

> What motivated me to say yes, it's like really the harsh reality that I would be doing all of the work anyways. So why not take a title change, if I'm going to be doing it all anyway? Just understanding my relationship with my supervisor and my relationship with the way that responsibilities had been distributed, when other people left, I knew that I would be doing all of the work, I would be the director. But what I still have the title of Associate Director, like if they're offering me this title, which will look great on a resume and offer me this professional development opportunity. I'm going to say yes to it. Because if I say no, I'm going to have to be doing it all anyway. So, I don't know, I almost feel like there wasn't really an option. The option was to say yes, and have the title and a small compensation, or say no, and still be doing me the work.

While Jessica selected achievement in her prompt, she did not provide as much detail and context in the second interview. Because she thought she would likely be doing the work anyway regardless of if she took the interim post or not, she noted that:

> Achievement fit best. I'm still early career so this was a career development opportunity. I can look back and talk about it. Power was interesting to look at. Now, looking back, I had more power than I realized. There was a gap that needed to be filled and though they probably needed me more than I needed them, I do think that it served me well. I mean, I

> think it was 11 months of robust experience. Like, if someone were to look at my resume, they're gonna see I was interim director for a year. And they may not know all of the ins and outs of what that experience was. So, I think, from a career development perspective, I think it was, was beneficial.

Jessica voiced a way in which her achievement was documented on her resume, which shows future employers' tangible evidence of what she accomplished and sets her up for a different career advancement pipeline compared to if she remained in her old posting and merely did the work. Without the title, staff members face a different challenge when trying to market their skills and abilities for jobs.

Lillian. Like Felipe, Lillian also provided thorough narratives pertaining to how her institution, department, and peers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, like Andrew she spoke passionately about building relationships and supporting students, recounting that: "We definitely got to be super collaborative with campus partners." In her first interview, Lillian was transparent with how she saw the interim role impacting her career path. Specifically, like how Felipe used the interim role to gain supervisory experience, she recalled how the interim role filled a gap with obtaining budgetary experience.

> I mean, I definitely, I definitely saw it as a pathway. Right? I definitely saw it as an opportunity. Because I mean, I think to one of your earlier questions, I didn't really have budgetary experience. And now, I can put on my resume that I managed a $1.4 million budget for a year.

The interim positions for the participants provided a means for them to gain and expand their skill set. Lillian also provided a unique motivator that no one else mentioned, which contained parts of affiliation and power. She recalled that:

> I think another piece for me was getting a seat at tables that I had not previously been able to get a seat at. So, some of the decision-making tables, being a part of just the, the leadership team. So being part of those Associate Dean's meant that I was in the biweekly meeting, you know, where it was just the Associate Dean's and a Senior Associate Dean and getting to talk about some of the visioning stuff that we're doing for our department. So, you know, I was, I had a seat at the table that I hadn't had previously. So that was definitely, you know, another motivator. I think in terms of those were definitely motivators for like, initially taking it.

The power associated with the position allowed Lillian to engage with leaders in a different way than her prior position allowed.

Lillian was one of two participants who stated that it took them some time to consider which motivator fit best for them. After starting the second interview, she recollected:

> I have to say, I sat at my computer for probably a solid, like seven minutes being like, I don't know, is it any of these? Is it none of these? Like, I don't know. And, and the thing I kept thinking about was like, well, you know, I really took it because I thought it would be like a developmental opportunity. And I could learn things. And the more I thought about it, the more it aligned with achievement for me, because I wanted to be successful in this position, the successes demonstrated that I had developed professionally, right? And so, you know, I, when I thought about, you know, my professional goals going in and being like, I didn't have direct supervision for many years, until I took this interim role. And then all of a sudden, I was, you know, supervising people. I was managing a budget, all of that I was able to put on my resume. And I probably wouldn't have if I had done it unsuccessfully, right? And so, I think that really sort of made me it really

> connected for me about sort of how I was translating my motivation, I guess, at the time for accepting the role, to me was like about development, but the outcome was the achievement piece, right? And being able to be successful in this role demonstrates that I could be successful in this role, either, you know, in this role, or a different role at the same level, like I now have the skills, I now have the experience where I could be successful. So that is definitely why I ended up with achievement.

While talking about the other motivators, Lillian provided thoughts on why others, specifically power, were not considered:

> I don't know, I had some feelings about the word power. Because my institution is a very political institution, right? And there are definitely like the haves and the have nots, and the powerful and the not powerful. And I was like, I don't want power. That's not what I'm looking for. I'm looking to do good work. But there was a piece of it, I think, that was also like, it gave me a seat at the tables that I didn't have a seat at before. And that helped me to achieve, but that power was like a necessary component towards reaching that achievement. So I think I had like a negative connotation of the word power. But the more I thought about it, I was like, yeah, that really was part of it, like put me in the room for some of the discussions that I feel like I've wanted to be a part of that I feel like part of the story is not being told that needs to be told, a perspective that is has not previously entered the conversation can now enter the conversation. And so I do think that you know, that inherent power that comes with the, the status, or that comes with the increased responsibilities, was a big contributor to the achievement piece.

Lillian's perspective highlights the complexity of motivation in seeking interim positions. On the one hand, achievement is easy to point out as a desire to increase skills and further develop as a

professional. On the other hand, the negative connotation of the word power often meant that participants had reluctance in stating this motivator to me. Yet, power was behind Lillian's desire to be at the table and to exert her own leadership.

Louis. Similar to the other two male participants, Louis provided multiple examples to the question of motivation during his first interview. He started off by saying:

> Well, I think it was multifaceted. One, we had a pretty incredible Dean of Students who was here for a long time and who wasn't perfect, but I knew how to be the number two. I knew how to fill in the gaps of what she either wasn't able to do or couldn't. She always treated me with such respect that I wanted to help her be successful. And I guess I had no illusion that I could develop a team even for a couple of months. And so, if it wasn't for the sitting Dean of Students, before she left helping me negotiate an interim salary, I wouldn't have had it. And trust me, it wasn't all that and a bag of chips; it was really not that much more. But it provided an incentive to do well. But to me, it was never about the money was never about the power, I don't know, power. But to me, it was about holding things together. Trying to move us forward as much as I could. And I never realized how hard it would be to manage during a crisis, every day. Because of the pandemic, and how exhausted we were, and no energy, the team would have to add work, additional work to change anything.

Louis identified his desire to help the institution and to support his unit by carrying on the good work of the prior dean. Yet in naming a specific motivator, he struggled.

When the time came for Louis to select a motivator, not only did it take him a lot of time to select the motivator that fit best, but he was the only participant who provided remarks and feedback about the options, saying that:

> I gotta tell you, I sat for a long time with the motivation descriptors, and I think that they were a little bit limiting in how they were defined. Because I can tell you honestly, I didn't ever consider power as something. I think a lot of it was wanting to, in my own way achieve belonging. I was that part of the inner circle, and I don't know other than wanting that, I don't know if it's recognition or acceptance or feeling of belonging, but I really had a personal and professional need to be a part of what I thought was an incredible leadership team. So, to me, the achievement is not that, like out of where you're finally there, but I was always sort of a leader behind the scenes. And it, it, really, it didn't matter to me for the most part that I helped other games be successful. And I thought, this is my way to not only achieve what is next for more, but also create that sense of belonging for the group I wanted to belong to, even if sometimes they didn't really care about that kind of thing.

Being part of the team and achieving a sense of belonging belied the simplicity of the four motivators provided.

Louis also provided extra narrative on his concept of power, and offered some self-reflection on what the role has taught him. These statements align with other comments from Louis when looking at not only his role and achievements but how his role impacts and influences the achievements of and for others. He said:

> I think that I have always believed that your own power comes from within. I have always experienced the more responsibility you have, the more lonely it is, and the harder it is to be the leader that you want. You think that you're just there as a placeholder? You're just there to keep the lights on until things happen. And I think because of the length of time, there was a lot of encouragement from I don't know folks in the

> community that encouraged me to apply. And I think for me now that I have moved to another institution the work is spent in modeling, mentoring, ensuring that we are developing the next leaders and doing the hard work and not just the pretty work. The work that's uncomfortable and the work that is rewarding.

Louis focused throughout the interviews on a servant leader perspective and approach. Thus, while he obtained some personal achievement, it was always for the greater good. While Louis selected achievement as his motivator, his statements seemingly align more with affiliation; unless the achievement is not his personal achievement, but others' achievements.

Summary. The motivator of achievement was selected by more than half of the participants, and spans across young professionals and seasoned, men and women, although, all the men aligned with this motivator. Notably, participants, especially the younger professionals, wanted experience. Also, the concept of power was not viewed in a positive way. Only one participant thought so, Liz.

Power. The motivator of power can be difficult to interpret. Individuals motivated by power seek positions of authority where they want to be responsible, impactful, and influential to others. Additionally, those who feel supported by their supervisors often tend to exceed the expectations set upon them in their authority role. There is often an assumption that people in or with power need to always be visible. Two participants described their affinity for doing "behind the scenes" work. Louis stated that "I was always sort of a leader behind the scenes" and "I helped other professionals be successful." Liz, added:

> I love a behind-the-scenes role. I love sort of pulling the strings to make the person who's out front successful. And so, I think even in that role, there is a sense of sort of probably like power and strength in your skill set to be able to do that.

It was interesting that for both participants who specifically mentioned doing behind the scenes work, this meant helping other people be successful in their roles rather than doing behind the scenes work to benefit themselves, their career goals, and their own interests. Elements of this ethos were previously mentioned by Louis, but Liz specifically selected this factor as her primary motivator.

Liz. During the first interview with Liz, she shared some of her motivations about why she accepted the interim role. These motivators focused on internal factors like a sense of duty and responsibility which tracks with affiliation, and external factors like the protection of staff and providing support for them. She recounted:

> For me, most of it was a sense of duty and sort of feeling like there was a need, and I could help play a solution. Ultimately, that is where I think for me, I landed. It was a sense of responsibility, a sense of duty. Because even the other pieces of professional development and whatnot, some of that I just felt like was that was not actually the primary motivator, I think I felt like, why me? I'm not the right person. This is what people thought I was going to do all along. Like, there was a lot of weird stuff, which may be unique to my experience. But I think a sense of duty, a sense of protection of also the staff, who I had known. And I think they needed some support. And so, I knew I could at least temporarily provide that. And so, it felt like a low risk, moment or opportunity at that time.

For the prompt prior to the second interview, Liz was the only participant to select the motivator of power. Many of the other participants indicated their struggle with defining this concept, often citing a dislike for the word and concept. For example, Louis stated that “I can tell you honestly, I didn't ever consider power as something that important.” Felipe added: “The power dynamic

piece, you know, just the way that's phrased, it makes me want to say no, it was never about me having more power." Lastly, Liz stated that "the word power itself felt weird. It feels gross to say power."

Still, despite her attitude and thoughts on power, she selected this as her primary motivator, citing her thought process, reasoning and rationale during our second interview.

> I struggled with this, but wanting to influence others and facilitate change led me to select Power. Loyalty, relationships with others, and proving myself were all components, too. Gaining experience was always a motivator. I do have the authority to sort of step in and lead and sort of just kind of being taken seriously in that way. I spoke a little bit about some of the impostor syndrome piece there too, which is so it's interesting that for me power ended up just being the one I selected, because perhaps ultimately that may have been it right because I was feeling like I wasn't maybe right for the role or shouldn't be in it or too soon or whatnot. For me, I never had the sort of ultimate goal of being in that sort of VPSA role. And so, I think even in that role, there is a sense like power and strength in your skill set to be able to do that. So, I imagine that's how I ended up sort of landing on the power piece.

For Liz, she saw an opportunity to use her power to help others and to advance the work in her position. She, along with many other participants were cognizant of how power sounded, and hesitant to select it as a motivator. This application of self-less power rather than personal power changes assumptions people may hold about being motivated by power.

No Motivator Selected. As noted, participants found thinking about their motivations for accepting the interim role proved difficult. On the one hand, the terms elicited some assumptions about what it meant to identify with the motivator (e.g., power). On the other hand, the narratives

of the participants also provided different types of evidence of motivations that either aligned with their stated motivation or indicated a different motivator than stated.

Dr. K During her first interview Dr. K indicated that the concepts of achievement, power and affiliation are still present in her interim role, but they were not personal motivators for why she accepted the interim position. For example, when asked about the concept of power, if she felt like she has power in the interim role, how she has used her power, and if that power has changed while being in the role, she stated that:

> I feel like it's changed dramatically. When I first came in, I was unsure if I had any power. I didn't know what to say. I'm just acting as if I'm the boss. Now, I have as much power as I think I would have in the permanent role. I can't imagine it would be different. It's really grown…I mean, it's been almost two years.

Similarly, while affiliation may not have been a personal motivator for her to accept the interim role, this motivator, which involves restoring and/or maintaining workplace relationships, was mentioned at several points in her narratives. While providing context about how she was asked and offered the interim role by her supervisor, Dr. K provided the following narrative:

> Well, a couple of things. One is, I have a lot of admiration for the person who asked me and so, if I can be helpful to them, that was very important to me. I also felt like of all the people, I probably had the best ability to hit the ground running because I had already had a year under my belt and I felt like I could bring, I can bring a real level of ability to the position. And I, I also feel I feel like I'm a team player. So being able to be a part of a team to help meet needs that needed to be met. So those are some of the things that come to mind.

Providing a "none of the above" option to participants proved necessary as this was what Dr. K

selected in her prompt. When asked to elaborate on why she selected that option, she replied that "I agreed to become interim because there was a need, and I was asked. I thought it was a great way to broaden my impact and be a part of the solution." While no additional narrative or context was given, elements of her response align with power and affiliation given that she speaks clearly about relationships, wanting to have an impact, and be influential to solve problems. Implications for how to navigate responses like Dr. K's, where self-reported responses may not fit into a particular category, but statements made during her interview(s) may align or strongly lean towards a motivator will be discussed later.

Affiliation. The motivation of affiliation involves a sense of belonging within the organization and a high regard for the relationships within it. While none of the participants specifically selected this as their primary motivator, narratives from participants show an awareness, appreciation, and high affinity to this motivator. For example, Andrew, Dr. K, and Louis all made statements pertaining to making decisions that affected and protected the institution, their team, and the students they served. Liz spoke passionately about wanting to use her power to influence others and prove her loyalty to the organization and the people within it. Additionally, many of the participants also mentioned the importance of developing, nurturing, and maintaining positive relationships with colleagues, both inside and outside of their organization. Thus, no one was primarily motivated by affiliation as it was already there within their functional area and organization.

Almost all the participants spoke plainly about the importance of maintaining a meaningful relationship with their supervisor. Whereas the power motivator seeks to be influential to others, especially those who they supervise, by delegating, the relationship with their supervisor is different and aligns more with the motivator of affiliation. This is due to the

strong focus on building and maintaining relationships for everyone in the functional area or organization. As we learned from some of the more seasoned participants, they were more focused on the needs and relationships of the entire team, rather than just the needs of one or a few.

Summary of Individual Motivators. While only two of McClelland's three motivators were specifically selected by participants all three were usually present throughout the various narratives. Even Dr. K, who selected none of the options, still provided narrative that supported all three components of McClelland's model. This aligns with Kurt (2022) in that while one trait tends to be more dominant, the others are still present. Similar to other participants who found it difficult to select just one of the three as the standout motivator, she, along with others like Liz and Louis, pondered for a while on the matter rather than making a snap decision. Additionally, it should be reiterated that sometimes, what the participant self-selected as their primary motivator for accepting the interim role sometimes did not always align with narrative they conveyed in an interview. While almost all the participants selected achievement as their motivator, they often incorporated elements of power and affiliation into their narratives. Thus, motivators can sometimes be clear and distinct with one being more dominant, or complicated with combinations of multiple or all motivators.

Chapter 4 Summary

The two research questions focused on obtaining narrative regarding participants' interim experiences and their motivation for why they accepted the interim role. Findings from this study indicated numerous shared and differing experiences between the participants. Most notably, the participants all felt like they were not adequately compensated during their interim roles. However, all were asked by their direct supervisors, and all had increased responsibilities during

their interim roles, specifically with supervision and budgetary duties. For many of the participants these additional duties were opportunities for professional development.

The differing experiences varied with noticeable differences between younger professionals, and men. Younger professionals wanted more professional development and access to opportunities to advance in the field. This was not mentioned by seasoned professionals who, given their extensive career histories did not need the same "steppingstones" as the newer professionals. Additionally, while stress and the emotional impact of the interim role were mentioned repeatedly by all the participants, men spoke far more in depth about these matters compared to women, especially when indicating how the interim role impacted their professional and personal lives.

When looking at individual motivators for why they accepted the interim role, the participants provided context to this these motivations in the interviews and when they self-selected a motivator prior to the second interview. Many participants indicated that selecting just one of the three motivators as their primary motivator was challenging. This was reflected and exemplified during the second interview when oftentimes participants would blend motivations together. Liz for example, selected power because she wanted to be influential to others, which aligns with power, but also to use her power to develop and strengthen relationships with others, which aligns more with affiliation. While none of the participants specifically selected affiliation as the primary motivator, all the participants clearly mentioned the importance of relationships in their functional areas and organization.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter has four objectives. First, the findings from the previous chapter will be discussed and analyzed in greater detail. This discussion addresses both research questions. Recall, the first research question centers on the experiences of the participants in their interim position, and the second focuses on the individual motivator for why the participant accepted the interim role. Second, a discussion of the findings related to the literature from Chapter 2 will showcase findings that were supported by literature, and findings that were contrary to the literature. Third, suggestions for policy and practice provide a translation of the findings into practical actions. This section will provide information and best practices to practitioners who are considering whether to pursue, apply for, or accept an interim role and for hiring managers/supervisors who need to hire a new interim employee or promote an internal employee to an interim role. Lastly, recommendations for future research are conveyed. These suggestions include small adjustments for replication, and larger adjustments if someone wanted to expand the original scope of the problem.

Discussion of Findings

The previous chapter yielded several findings pertaining to the participants' shared and differing experiences before, during, and after their interim roles. Their motivation(s) for why they accepted the interim role were similar and different. Differences were attributed to their experience level and gender. The discussion that follows looks at the holistic experiences of the participants and their motivations for why they accepted an interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic. This format allows both research questions to be thoroughly analyzed and discussed,

and provides context for the application to literature, policy implications, and recommendations for future research.

Experiences Before the Interim Role

Prior experience that occurred before accepting the interim role informed how the participants experienced their new role and influenced what happened to them after their interim role ended. Learning about the participant's interim experiences and their motivations for why they accepted the role includes more than examining what occurred during their time in the interim role. Before even beginning the interim position, the participants provided insight into several factors from their past that may also have affected their interim experience and motivation for accepting the role. These factors, including their entry into the field, their career histories, and the stress they harbored before accepting the role affected how they experienced their interim roles.

Entry Into the Field. The participants had varied entries into the field of student affairs and their functional areas. Two seasoned professionals, Andrew and Loius, stated their entry into the field was "by accident" while others, such as Lillian, was gradual and calculated starting when she was an undergraduate Resident Assistant. Lillian then progressed to a position during her graduate program as a live-in staff member, and then into her first professional role. Dr. K began her career as a clinician before entering higher education as a faculty member. Her jump over to student affairs was only a recent move. While the other participants did not go into as much depth and detail compared to those previously mentioned, there is something to consider when comparing how some of the seasoned professionals who entered the field "by accident" compared to newer professionals like Jessica and Felipe who just knew that student affairs was a career. The newer professionals mostly moved right from their undergraduate experience into

graduate school/student affairs roles. Many assistantships for graduate programs are in student affairs, thus creating an entry point into the field that may not look or feel as "accidental" compared to others like Andrew and Dr K who had careers outside of higher education prior to joining the field.

Literature on why practitioners enter the field is limited, but some, such as Boehman (2007), identified student affairs work as a "calling" (p. 307). Prior to accepting their interim roles none of the participants indicated disliking their work in student affairs. Rather, most, especially Andrew and Louis, indicated a strong commitment to the field and to student service even though they did not intentionally start out thinking about a career in student affairs (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015). The narratives and findings start to reveal that the more experienced professionals have a richer story to tell with their career histories pre-pandemic.

Career History. The participants' career histories and work experiences held some similarities, with the more seasoned professionals commenting that their length of time in the field gave them more work history and experience to draw from in their interim roles. One such similarity included prior work history in the functional area of residence life where both Andrew and Louis referenced having experience. Lillian also had residence life experience, but her entire work history, including her prior interim role occurred in this functional area so her experience on this matter is different, even compared to Andrew and Louis's experiences. Residence Life is worth noting as a discussion point because of previous comments from Felipe and Lillian. While talking about what work experiences Felipe did not want during his career in higher education, he knew that Residence Life was one of them. The sheer size and scope of duties associated with Residence Life staff, especially live-in and live-on staff, can be overwhelming. Lillian reinforced this when she spoke about how her institution tested thousands of students and synthesized daily

reports to the Chancellor during COVID-19. Lillian also added that living and working in the same place was disadvantageous during the pandemic. Not being able to have family or friends visit her in her on campus residential living space, especially while caring for a newborn, blended her professional role and personal life together. Those with Residence Life backgrounds, especially the more seasoned staff, were likely able to draw from those experiences during their interim roles when making decisions, especially ones involving students who were still on campus during the pandemic.

Many of the more seasoned participants also had prior budgetary and supervisory experience during various points in their careers. However, the younger professionals such as Felipe, Jessica, and Lillian reported having little or no professional supervisory experience prior to accepting the interim role. Prior to accepting the interim role, all three of these younger professionals clearly expressed a desire and need to their supervisors about wanting to obtain supervisory experience for their professional development. Professional development and career advancement opportunities are extremely important to professionals (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015). The desire to further develop as a professional was also one of the primary reasons and motivators for why the younger participants selected achievement as their motivator for accepting the role.

When looking at the participants' prior work histories and breadth of experiences in the field, the more seasoned professionals seemed better equipped and more prepared professionally for their interim roles. This time in the field suggests that the seasoned participants had more work (professional) and life (personal) experiences, which involved both good and bad events, to draw from when leading and making decisions. Thus, developing a "work experience portfolio" consisting of a variety of work experiences over a career translates to practitioners taking what

they have learned and experienced in one role and applying it to the next role (Blackwell et al., 2001, p. 282). For those newer in the field, they sought to acquire more professional experience to advance in their careers, and especially desired supervisory roles.

Stress. Student Affairs is a stressful and unpredictable environment. The pandemic impacted higher education enrollment, finances, and day-to-day operations, and practitioners in student affairs experienced new sources and levels of stress and unpredictability (McClure et al., 2023). Some participants talked about the stress they or their supervisor felt or experienced before they entered the interim role. One obvious source of this stress was hiring freezes that halted all job searches within the institution. The inability to fill positions, especially as individuals moved into new roles, left a gap in staffing that interims also had to cover. If they could not cover the job functions, tasks were left incomplete or finished in a slower fashion. Interim vacancies range from being planned and expected or unplanned and sudden. COVID-19 ushered in all types of unplanned staffing needs.

Given the unpredictability of the pandemic, most of the participants indicated that their institutions moved quickly to fill interim roles at all levels, including the VPSA, Dean, and Director levels. The participants spoke about how some of their supervisors and hiring managers were able to effectively answer questions, provide position descriptions, and expectations for the role, whereas others were not. The uncertainty of role expectations was influenced by career stage. Professionally, younger practitioners desire to know from the very beginning what is expected of them (Wilhelm, 2024). Their expectations regarding work styles and philosophies can differ sharply compared to seasoned professionals who think it is perfectly normal to work 50-60 hours per week (Wilhelm, 2024). The findings from this study showed differences in expectations based on career stage. Most notably, this was exemplified with narrative from

Louis, who after working all day would come home open his laptop and continue working. Andrew also spoke about having meeting after meeting after meeting at his institution with both students and administrators. Lastly, Lillian talked about having to adjust how her institution approached being on-call for emergencies. With fewer staff in the on-call rotation, she was working more, even if working meant being ready and available to work. Stress was already present in participants' personal and professional lives before the pandemic. Once they accepted the interim role, this would be amplified.

Motivations. Before accepting the interim role, elements from all three of the motivators, achievement, power, and affiliation were present when looking at the participants' entry into the field, career history, and stress prior to accepting the interim role. Recalling that affiliation is about wanting to belong to a group, collaborate with others, and whenever possible avoiding high risk, power is about wanting status, recognition, and to influence others, and that achievement is about accomplishing goals and receive feedback, it is evident from the narratives that, especially for the newer, younger professionals their career histories were still evolving and blossoming. They wanted experience and accomplishments in the field (achievement) but also needed the support from others such as supervisors and peers (affiliation) to help get it. When looking at relationships, Lillian in particular spoke about the relationship with her husband, who helped her talk/about and process the interim offer with her. He was able to provide an unbiased, non-higher education perspective, especially when it came to asking about whether she would be getting a pay raise and promotion. As for power, Jessica spoke about wanting the title of director, especially since she anticipated and expected that she would be doing the job anyway. Titles are one way for interims to have evidence for their achievement motivation.

During the Interim Role

Some participants like Andrew and Lillian had prior interim experience before accepting this role during the pandemic. This background experience gave them a heightened awareness of what to expect in their new roles. As indicated above, the participants' narratives indicate that the participants background and work experiences influenced their interim roles. One area of prominence and concern during their interim roles was additional compensation, which included how much compensation, and any negotiation over the level of compensation. While previously mentioned in the last section, stress also came up as an issue when the participants described their interim roles and how at times, it differed from what they thought the interim role would actually be. Lastly, some participants also noted the level and type of sacrifices they endured, and how these personal sacrifices affected their friends and family members, too. The factors that emerged during their interim role had a lasting effect and remain salient for the participants even in a post-pandemic environment.

Compensation. Dissatisfaction with pay and compensation is not new to professional and administrative employees in higher education (Greenfield, 2022). Student Affairs in particular carries a stigma of being a low-pay career, and low-pay rates were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wilhelm, 2024). While all participants indicated receiving extra compensation during the duration of their interim roles, the amount fell short of their expectations compared to the time spent performing the duties associated with the interim role. The participants, like many others, felt overworked during the pandemic.

Wilhelm (2024) stated that people can be motivated to serve in interim student affairs roles, but that there must be parity between the demands of the role and the compensation. Supervisors and hiring managers who advocate for additional funds, in an effort to make the

interim role more attractive, are often met with familiar responses about budget constraints. Yet, this rationale seems incongruous for those asked to serve in these elevated positions that come with additional tasks, skills, and expertise. Supervisors and hiring managers can reiterate and stress other non-financial benefits to interim roles, and internal employees counter that they already receive these benefits in their current positions. This can be exemplified through narrative provided by Andrew. While he did not specifically state that he got any additional time off as compensation for his interim role, he noted that he was not taking any of his earned days off. Thus, financial compensation seems to be the gold standard for how to compensate an employee.

It is worth noting that a major concern of the COVID-19 pandemic was how the decline in enrollment and tuition dollars could potentially affect other financial operations across the institution. Institutions varied in terms of the ultimate financial impact on their budgets. According to Andrew, the budget on his campus was not severely reduced. Other participants, such as Jessica noted that once she took over budgetary operations for her department, she was able to see "what was behind the curtain," and she saw that departments had money and other resources. Other participants did not comment on the impact of their institution's budget on their ability to accomplish their job functions. A post-mortem on the financial impact of the pandemic is beyond the scope of this study and did not appear to be notable for the study's participants beyond how they were personally impacted by their own compensation.

Stress. One of the major findings from participant narratives indicated constant feelings of stress and burnout in their professional career as a result of their interim role during the pandemic. Post-pandemic surveys have clearly indicated that the past few years were especially stressful for practitioners in student affairs (Wilhelm, 2024), reiterating the feeling the

participants noted of always being “on” and how this 24/7 time-commitment led to increased feelings of burnout. As such, this, along with other factors such as low pay, and a transition back from remote and/or hybrid working to a 100% in-person office presence has led to practitioners leaving student affairs roles or the field of higher education (Greenfield, 2022). In my study, Andrew, Felipe, Jessica all left higher education after finishing their interim roles, and Lillian and Louis left their institution to seek other positions. Louis recounted that his supervisor at his previous institution was not excited for the extra time and work that went into endeavors, but at his current institution his supervisor “wants to know what is going on and what went into a project and decision. She then offers support and wants me to talk with others about it, too.”

Sources of stress were everywhere. Externally, there were growing demands from students and parents who expected universities and administrators in student affairs to do more with less, especially staffing (Wilhelm, 2024). Internally, among the myriad of stressors outlined in Chapter 4, the participants were also faced with implementing new policies and procedures to respond to the pandemic (McClure et al., 2023). Some participants, including Felipe and Louis indicated that in addition to implementing new policies and procedures, they also needed to quickly create them, and ultimately enforce them, too. Many participants also noted that even though they were promoted from within their functional area and were aware of and versed in the duties of their interim role, there were still certain unknowns within their role. Considering that the participants entered their interim roles at different times during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Feb. 2021 for Lillian vs. Feb. 2022 for Dr. K) the participants still endured similar and, to a degree, differing experiences and stressors despite their entry point into the role. In addition to stress generated from work and in their professional lives, participants noted stress in their

personal lives. However, while some of the participants referenced having children, they did not identify having children at home as an additional layer of stress.

Sacrifices. Results from the previous chapter showcased how the stressors participants faced in their professional lives had an impact on their personal lives. Participants sacrificed their mental health, physical health, and relationships with family and friends during their interim roles. While none of the participants indicated they themselves, their spouses, or children were immunocompromised, the participants, especially Lillian as a live-on staff member, spoke plainly about having frequent and close contact with others at work (McClure et al., 2023). Similarly, although many institutions used buzzwords such as *community*, and *care* when interacting with students, there was often misalignment with how this applied to staff, who were burned out from chronic work (McClure et al., 2023). For example, Wilhelm (2024) stated that it is easy for student affairs practitioners to put themselves last because there is always some kind of fire to put out. Felipe mentioned these stressors and sacrifices multiple times throughout both of his interviews. The outlier, Dr. K, is worthy of mention because when compared to Felipe and Jessica who were constantly feeling overwhelmed, she spoke very little of feeling overwhelmed and stressed to the point where she contemplated leaving the interim role. In fact, given that she is still in her interim role, she has been able to manage the stress of the role quite effectively.

A finding that stands out from the narratives about the sacrifices the participants endured in their personal relationships was the counternarrative of how the participants held strong professional relationships. Narratives from the participants noted the importance of building or maintaining existing functional relationships in their work environments (Merritt & Clyne, 2020); however, at the same time the participants noted the many sacrifices they endured regarding their spouses, family, and friends. Despite being stressed and burned-out at work the

participants fostered and at times prioritized relationships with colleagues. On the one hand, it may be the participants felt the strength of institutional relationships because everyone was experiencing the same stressful work conditions. On the other hand, it may simply be that these work relationships were critical because of the ways in which they facilitated the job duties of their interim positions. The participants did not distinguish or provide reasons for the strength and priority of these relationships.

After the Interim Role

The participants ended their interim roles at different times throughout the pandemic (Figure 1). The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. On May 5, 2023, they declared that COVID-19 was no longer a public health emergency, signaling that COVID-19 was moving toward being endemic (Klobucista & Ferragamo, 2023). All but one of the participants were out of their interim position by May 2023, with most leaving their role between December 2021–May 2022. The findings highlight that even after participants left their interim role, their institution, or the field of higher education the lengthy passage of time between their departure to when they were interviewed for this study allowed ample time for self-reflection, and also surfaced continued stress and doubt about their futures.

Internal Self-Reflection. Whether participants voiced awareness or not, they were engaging in self-reflection throughout their entire interim process. Participants had to do some level of reflection to consider whether to accept the interim position, whether it was the right move for them, whether it would advance their career, or how it would help their colleagues or the organization. This type of thinking can be challenging to do, especially in the moment or when time is short. In situations where position departures are abrupt or unforeseen, those quickly transitioning into interim roles have little time to prepare (Merritt & Clyne, 2020). This

preparation can also include mental preparation by reflecting on various factors such as known and potential stressors. Thus, it is often not until after an experience ends and there is a passage of time that practitioners can truly reflect on an experience. All but one participant spoke plainly about how their physical and mental health were affected because of the demands of their interim role. The earliest participant in start an interim role, Andrew, stated in his interview that:

> It does a lot to your mental health. You're working so hard for your institution, and you don't really provide yourself with vacation or days off. You feel obligated to be there, to be present without being present. Each day matters. Each employee matters. I tried to create something, create a legacy, but I lost.

When Andrew had the opportunity to reflect on his experience, he noted the level of stress with always being "on" and how the inability to take a break affected his mental health. His motivation to help the institution during a time of crisis came at a personal cost. Louis also spoke plainly about how his organization set him up for failure in the role. He added:

> We created a system related to student behavior that didn't have options for due process…that didn't have options for failure. And I think translating all of that into everything that we were doing, that we sort of set ourselves up for failure. As a result, it became more employees became disillusioned with our work.

These reflections of never being enough for the role left some participants feeling diminished, especially when their motivations to accept the interim role were based in achievement.

However, there are still lessons and positive takeaways to be learned from failures. One way to combat the feelings of failure or missed opportunity is for individuals to reflect upon personal leadership gaps in preparation for future roles (Merritt & Clyne, 2020). Instead of focusing on what went wrong, reframing the interim experience can note accomplishments

(Vaillancourt, 2018), as well as figuring out opportunities of what to do differently in the future. Louis spoke about this in his second interview, recalling how at his new institution he negotiated with someone coming into an interim role to reach a place where both were happy with the job duties, expectations, and above all, compensation.

Lastly, while self-reflection did result in assessing failures, it also resulted in positive outcomes. Felipe and Liz both mentioned relationships with colleagues and campus partners improving dramatically. Everyone was in the same boat during COVID-19 feeling stressed and burned out. But they had to work and rely on each other more because they were short staffed or had limited time or resources. Also, it is likely they were just too tired and exhausted themselves to get frustrated at one another. Jessica reflected on her advocacy during the crisis in two ways; first with her own, stating that she learned how to use her voice and expertise. While she was not always successful, her effort should be recognized. Second, she advocated for her functional area. As the sole professional in her area, she had to advocate for what she needed in order to be successful, Lastly, Liz conveyed excited narrative about how her functional area was able to reorganize during and after the pandemic after learning new ways to operate.

Stress and Doubt. For almost half of the participants, stepping away from their interim role also resulted in them stepping out of higher education, a decision that was no doubt stressful for them to make and endure. The participants' narratives and actions highlight that the stress from the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on them. They described how during their interim roles they were constantly stressed and endured significant sacrifices to their own health and wellness, and with quality time spent with family and friends. Reflecting on this period of stress, most of the narratives focused on regret. Felipe in particular regretted working long hours and adjusting his schedule so much for his job. While he craved advancement and access to

opportunity, it came at a price. As previously mentioned, stress can teach us a lot about ourselves and what we can do differently moving forward. Both Jessica and Felipe provided appropriate advice and suggestions to those considering an interim role, so that others do not leave the field of higher education as they did. These will be expanded upon later in the chapter when looking at implications for those in the field.

Acknowledgement of the stress associated with student affairs in higher education environments is starting to gain attention. In a recent, post-pandemic survey, results indicated that a third of the respondents were unsure of their future in student affairs, and a quarter were reluctant to recommend working in student affairs to colleagues (Wilhelm, 2024). Participants in this study, especially those who left the field, conveyed similar outlooks towards their future. While the interim experience served an opportunity to "try on" a role (Merritt & Clyne, 2020), a negative experience in a temporary role can sour their entire outlook. This is evident with actions taken by Andrew, Felipe, and Jessica who not only stepped away from their interim roles, but also from their institutions, and the field.

Summary of Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on practitioners in student affairs who accepted an interim role during the crisis. This study found that similarities existed among the participants in their interim roles and that differences emerged that were most often linked to the participant's time in the field or gender. Findings indicated a range of individual motivations for why the participants accepted an interim role during a pandemic. Achievement was noted most often as the motivator spurring the participants to say "yes" when asked to serve in an interim role. A key feature emerging from the participants' interim experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic was the constant presence of stress before, during, and after the interim experience, and the sacrifices

interims endured to their own physical and mental health, and overall wellness. Even months after their interim roles had ended, when narrating their experiences to me participants were able to recall stressors and the accompanying emotions experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The duration of the interim role provided meaningful opportunities for self-reflection and growth, yet for almost half of the participants, the interim experience culminated with their departure from the field. Despite having achievement as a key motivator for accepting their interim roles, three of the seven participants left the field of higher education and two left their institutions. One participant, Dr. K, still remains in her interim position at the time of this writing.

Application to Literature

The motivations for practitioners accepting interim leadership in student affairs is scant and outdated. Moreover, literature on matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic is still emerging. Thus, this section discusses the findings of this study relative to the known literature and identifies new contributions to the field. The goal of narrative research is to give meaning to other's experiences through storytelling (Ntinda, 2019). As such, elements from the narratives coincide with prior findings, to include stories and experiences, in the literature. As well, the findings also dispel some prior findings about interim leaders for the participants in this study. Finally, a discussion occurs about ways in which the findings of this study help expand understanding of the role of a crisis on interim roles.

Findings that Support the Literature

In the preceding chapters, several statements, claims, and assumptions were presented pertaining to interim leadership in higher education, crisis, and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted higher education. The participants provided firsthand accounts of their interim

experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of their experiences, especially those related to staffing, how they defined what type of interim they were (e.g., placeholder, healer), and the specific motivators of achievement, advancement, and fulfillment align with existing literature. Each of the aforementioned experiences is discussed relative to existing literature.

Staffing. Throughout the pandemic, a litany of problems in higher education, especially related to staffing emerged (Flaherty, 2020). These problems included staff searches being put on hold, staff leaving their roles and/or the institution, staff operating with fewer members and resources in their unit, and staff members working in uncertain, unpredictable, and stressful environments (Flaherty, 2020; Lederman, 2022; Robinson & Maitra, 2020). The participants reiterated a range of institutional and departmental problems, stemming from staffing, that added to feelings of being in an unpredictable environment. Louis reflected on staffing at his institution during the pandemic, stating that:

> We lost a number of employees at the beginning of COVID, and that included administrative staff and included professional staff, and some of our Dean staff, too. And so, we also had a senior member of the of our team who was on leave for a year. And it required knowing that we were in a pandemic, knowing that we were not going to be able to hire additional staff, that there was a lot of interim roles coming. We lost a lot of people after one of our deans left about three months into my interim position, they started the domino process for others leaving.

This account highlights that while certain positions within a department were being filled by interim administrators, staff members at all levels were leaving and that interims were feeling the loss of staff regardless of their level and role. Lillian also spoke of a chain-reaction effect at her institution when addressing the workload, adding that:

> I don't think I could have fathomed the increased workload. And I think that it was very unique to being in an interim position, right? Because the nature of interim positions is that no one's filling the role that you left, but you're filling another role. And so like, there might be a little bit of redistribution, but like, that's usually not going to happen. And so like, you just sort of have to, like really do a much heavier lift. And I think sometimes it's really hard to anticipate what that will actually look like until you're in it. So I think that's a big thing.

Lillian reflected on what could be described as trial by fire that she experienced in her interim role. The decrease in overall staffing meant the participants were filling multiple holes in the organization.

The back filling of vacant positions involved the movement of employees across the institution, where filling a position with an interim immediately created an opening in the organizational hierarchy. The crisis of the pandemic created a new environment in which larger numbers of interims were required across all types of institutions of higher education. When an administrator left their interim role their supervisor and/or the institution was faced with the original dilemma all over again; promote another internal interim or leave the position vacant. No matter the decision, the result was the same, filling one vacancy with an interim role created a gap in another area, and caused practitioners to experience elevated levels of stress because of an increased, unpredictable workload.

Type of Interims. Existing literature does a lackluster job defining salient terms associated with those who take on temporary roles within an organization. Farrell (2016) specifically references how terms like acting and interim are often used interchangeably. Literature on the types of interims is a little more consistent and there were several instances

where participants self-identified as one of the specific interim "types" historically associated with interim roles. Lillian references being a caretaker in her interim role. This passive leadership style, described by London (2020) as "keeping the trains running" (p. 2), was mentioned throughout her interview. This type of interim leader seems ideal during times of crisis. The goal of the leader is not to fix, or prepare, but to simply maintain, which in an unpredictable environment can be challenging.

Liz also references being a healer, a type of interim defined by Farquhar (1995) as tasked with repairing an organization in preparation for a new successor. Given the crisis of the pandemic, Liz described the repair nature of her interim role as a desire to "calm things down." This type of role function may be a challenge for interims depending on the length of time they are in their interim role, and the depth and breadth of repairs needed. Additionally, as an internal interim, Liz may have felt like this was obtainable considering her prior institutional knowledge. An interim from outside the functional area of their interim role may find the role of healing more challenging when trying to learn and assess what a functional area looks like during times of crisis.

The last type of interim mentioned in existing literature is the contender. Defined by Mooney et al. (2013) as the person who seeks to transition from the interim role into the permanent role, this is the smallest and riskiest type of interim. As such, literature on this type of interim was difficult to obtain. This type of interim role applied to two of the participants, who applied for, but were not offered the permanent role. Louis and Lillian did not receive the permanent position after interviewing, thus being an interim contender did not result in a positive outcome for them. Although it may seem completely advantageous to simply have the interim step into the role permanently, Alley (2005) noted a particular disadvantage of this type of

interim compared to others. Having the temporary interim step into the role permanently may discourage others, especially other internal employees within the organization from even applying for the role. As such, while neither of the participants indicated that they had to agree up-front, before accepting the interim role, that they could not apply for the permanent role, this strategy can be implemented to interims to circumvent awkward or unpleasant scenarios where the current interim is not selected for the permanent role (Alley, 2005). In the case of the two participants who applied for and did not receive the permanent position, one left the institution and the other left for another position in the same functional area.

Achievement, Accomplishment, Advancement, and Fulfillment. As noted in Chapter 1, interims consider various factors including achievement, advancement, and fulfillment, prior to accepting their role. While some of these factors are motivations within McClelland's 1961 model, the factors listed above differs by looking at the overall interim experience and not just the motivation(s) for why someone accepted an interim role. These factors can also originate and stem from multiple sources such as through individual experiences, or interactions with supervisors.

Achievement. When looking at achievement, the participants provided a variety of reasons as to why they thought they were selected or tapped for the interim role. For some participants like Jessica, she was in an "office of one" so she seemed like the logical candidate. Others, like Andrew, asked the president how he could be of service. Similarly, Dr. K stated that "they asked, I answered" thus showing how some participants were altruistic and committed to serving their institutions and departments in a time of need (Browning & Boys, 2015; Hector & Aguirre, 2009; Kroth, 2007; Mundt, 2004).

Accomplishment. Some interims, such as Felipe and Liz, both conveyed narratives about having supportive supervisors who they believed were committed to their success in the interim role. They reported that their supervisors enjoyed spending time with them, and often provided acknowledgment for a job well done. This relationship-based approach, as stated by Hector and Aguirre (2009) reiterates the importance of meaningful relationships and the power that supervisors can have with team members during times of crisis. In the case of Felipe and Liz, despite feeling stressed and overwhelmed, they still felt a sense of accomplishment when completing tasks effectively, and when their supervisors mentored and guided team.

Advancement. The participants, especially the younger professionals, reflected on their reasons for seeking out and accepting the interim role. For younger professionals, who are still building their resume and forging their career, the path to advancement can be unclear. Recounting Felipe's narrative, he stated that:

> I wanted to grow in my career. I had been in my role for two years, and I thought it was a great steppingstone to show leadership and move up. Unfortunately, in the Higher Ed space…you know, there's millions of like Residence Hall Director openings, right? But there is only one Director of Residence Life at every institution. There's probably what, like six to 10 like residence hall directors or something, and there's only one Director of Residence Life. Again, I didn't want to work in residence life, but the same applies across the board for all the other departments. There's one, Vice President Student Affairs. There's one Dean of Students. And oftentimes those positions don't become available until somebody retires or they pass away or, or they leave for another job. And then you're competing with everyone out in the whole world and also people at your institution that have been there 15 years, 20 years.

This narrative aligns perfectly with literature from Mundt (2004) that states that taking on work, especially at the dean and director level gives interims a chance to grow professionally. Also, Farquhar (1995) showed how interim experiences give interims an opportunity to gain new skills that will prepare them for the next step in their career. While this concept can be applied to any practitioner regardless of the amount of time spent in the field, the younger professionals were more vocal about career advancement compared to the seasoned professionals. The exception for this study pertains to the participants who applied for their interim roles permanently and were not selected. They had to leave their role or institution to advance their career.

Fulfillment. The last factor of why people might seek out interim positions, fulfillment, runs parallel to the altruistic elements seen in achievement and the growth found in advancement. Research from Aguirre and Bolton (2013) indicated a deep care and concern not just for the organization, but for those around them. The three more experienced professionals, Andrew, Dr. K and Louis, all asked themselves what they could do for the organization, but also for those under their supervision. Similar to what was stated with advancement, especially from the younger professionals, although this factor is not specific to more seasoned professionals, it so happened that the two participants who conveyed narrative about this factor were more experienced. This would be interesting to pursue in a non-pandemic replication study to see how, if at all, being in crisis potentially affected their fulfillment with the role.

My findings align with the existing research in numerous ways. The unpredictability and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected staffing at institutions, resulting in greater numbers of internal interim employees being used to fill vacancies. This often created a cascade effect, whereby promoting one practitioner into an interim role resulted in a vacancy somewhere else within the functional area or organization. Next, some practitioners who

accepted an interim role self-identified as a certain type of interim mentioned in existing literature. This largely depended on their duties and expectations, and length of time in the interim position. As literature continues to build on these factors, especially COVID-19, it will be important for scholars and researchers to conduct new research to add to the field as well as replication studies to show consistencies or inconsistencies in literature. In particular and most notably, attention needs to be directed towards factors like burnout and stress in relation to how all employees, including temporary ones like interims find fulfillment.

Deviations from the Literature

The limited and dated literature on interim leadership and crisis provides an opportunity to expand existing literature and highlight areas of deviations. Of note, the literature on COVID-19 continues to emerge and often is not widely published yet. The narratives of my participants help expand understanding about the existing literature on acting vs. interim leadership, stress, and the assumed outcome of interim experiences. The sections that follow highlight these topics.

Acting vs. Interim. Looking back at the difference in definitions between acting and interim, the quick version is that acting roles are temporary, and provide day-to-day leadership until the person in that role comes back (Farquhar, 1995), while an interim has the full power of authority of someone who is in the role permanently and stays in the role until a permanent person is hired (Gee et al., 2010). While the participants provided similar accounts of how they were asked into their roles, their duties, responsibilities, institutional environments, and duration of their interim roles were vastly different. After listening to some participants describe their role it is plausible, based on the prior definitions outlined in Chapter 1, that some participants were realistically in acting, and not interim roles. While many of the participants provided narrative as to the type of interim role they were in, such as the contender, or the healer, Jessica provided

reflective narrative expressing thoughts about whether she was in an interim or an acting role. When asked what advice she would give to a friend or colleague who was exploring an interim role she stated:

> Have them ask if this is an acting role or interim role? Are you going to be there to maintain the status quo like what I did, or be the Director with all the privileges, duties, and roles that come with it?

Jessica's reflection assumes that she knows the difference, based on existing literature, between interim and acting roles. As previously noted, these definitions are often inconstantly applied in the literature. Based on some of the other narratives that were conveyed, especially those who described their "interim" roles as lacking authority, power, or decision-making abilities, they may have actually been in an acting role.

Stress. Taking on an interim role can be both physically and mentally exhausting (Farrell, 2018). The unpredictability of the work associated with an interim role can be especially stressful for those in interim roles. Lederman (2022) reiterated this and added that the uncertainty of the pandemic also added an additional level of stress to those in interim leadership roles. While most of the participants, especially men, indicated high levels of stress in their professional roles and personal lives, several recent studies looking at gender differences in the emotional response to the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that men showed significantly less anxiety and stress compared to women in their personal lives early in the pandemic (Garcia-Fernandez et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022). However, it is worth noting at many of these studies were conducted early, at the onset of pandemic, and pertain almost exclusively to effects on personal, not professional lives.

Outcome of Interim Experience. The last finding that was contrary to the existing literature was by far the strongest and most applicable to all the participants, and to future research about outcomes of interim roles. One of the common assumptions conveyed in the statement of the problem indicated that those in interim roles often leave the institution after their interim appointment has ended. Existing literature, specifically Farquhar (1995), dispel this assumption, stating the opposite—that most interims stay at their institution after an interim appointment. Additionally, Alley (2005) noted instances where an interim might be prohibited from applying for the permanent role. In this case, these interims would return to their previous role at the conclusion of the interim role if they did not leave the institution. None of the participants indicated this scenario of not being allowed to apply for the permanent role; indeed, Louis and Lillian did apply for their positions when it was posted. All the participants had the option to return to their previous roles.

However, of the seven participants, only one (Louis) went back to his previous role but ultimately left the institution a few months later. One participant (Lillian) stayed at their current institution at the end of their interim role but took on a new position within the same function area rather than return to their old role. One participant (Liz) stayed at their current institution and was promoted to their interim role full-time. One participant, Dr. K, as of March 2024 is still in their interim role. Lastly, three participants (Andrew, Felipe, and Jessica) not only left their interim roles and their institution, but also left the field entirely. This finding is a stark contrast to the limited research on the outcomes of interim roles and aligns more with the assumption previously mentioned that most interim employees leave the organization after their role has ended.

To further add to the complexity of this topic, narrative from two of the three participants who left the field entirely, Jessica and Felipe, both indicated that given the opportunity whether to "do it all over again" and accept their previous interim roles at their institution or accept another interim role in the future with the same outcome from their last interim role, both responded affirmatively to both instances. Both cited that the professional development and personal growth obtained during their interim role outweighed the stress and departure from the organization that accompanied it.

Other situational factors such as their duration in the role are worthy of mention and exploration when discussing potential outcomes of interim roles. When looking at the duration of Andrew and Louis's interim roles, both served well beyond the initial time estimates provided by their supervisor. Considering their outcomes resulted in Andrew leaving the field and Louis eventually leaving the institution, both of their institutions lost seasoned practitioners with a wealth of institutional knowledge that can no longer be imparted to others at the institution. In Jessica's case, the reason her interim Director role was open was because her supervisor was also being promoted into an interim role. Assuming her supervisor wants to and does return to their previous role as Director, Jessica's interim role essentially would end when her supervisor's interim role ends. Here, the domino effect described above in filling positions and the vacancies left in their wake operates in reverse with interims required to leave the temporary positions they were holding. Likewise with Andrew and Louis, if their interim role ends up lasting longer than expected, the trickle-down effect for other staff holding interim roles also extended. When the organizational chart is filled with many interim positions, there is a constant flux of personnel moving up, down, and across the institution and this movement can create a lack of stability.

My findings diverge with the existing literature in numerous ways. Inconsistent definitions and applications of salient terms like interim versus acting can lead to confusing results that leave readers, researchers, and scholars with more questions than answers. This lack of clarity in role title can be further complicated by participants, such as Jessica, who assumed they are in one type of position over another, which can influence the type of power the interim feels they possess. Next, the factor of stress, both on a professional level from being in an interim role during the pandemic, and on a personal level from how the pandemic affected their relationships, requires much more study and exploration. Although recent literature indicates that more women compared to men, exhibited signs of personal stress as a result of the pandemic, the men in this study were more expressive about their personal and professional stress compared to women. Lastly, the outcome of interim experiences is an area where, like stress, requires significantly more study to better understand on a longitudinal level what happens to practitioners after serving in an interim role. Of the seven participants in this study, none of them returned permanently to their prior roles.

Implications for Policy and Practice

While the goals of this research were to convey the narratives of the participants and their motivation(s) for why they accepted the interim role during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are notable implications for practitioners and policy makers in the field. All but two of the participants, Andrew and Louis, indicated a willingness to accept another interim role in the future and most of the participants provided narrative showing some measure of self-reflection on what they learned from their experience and what they would do differently in a future experience. Thus, the first section provides suggested best practices for those who are considering, applying for, or accepting an interim role. The second section provides hiring

managers/supervisors who are looking for or need to hire or promote an employee into an interim role with examples about how to prepare for the recruitment, onboarding, training, and supervision of an interim employee. Structuring the implications in this manner allows all participants, even those who would not accept an interim role again an opportunity to reflect upon the suggestions since all participants might, one day be the hiring manager/supervisor who needs to hire or promote an employee to an interim role.

Information for Practitioners Considering an Interim Role

Regardless of their age, gender, experience level, or their current whereabouts in the field, the participants provided thoughtful and reflective "lessons learned" for their future edification or for practitioners who are exploring whether to accept an interim role. These factors stem from their personal and professional experiences and thus carried a deep meaning to the participants who often displayed heightened emotions while conveying their narrative. Some of the factors are internal and require practitioners to think and reflect on a matter, while others are external that should be directed towards supervisors or hiring managers. The three factors listed below are intentionally ordered in a certain way for practitioners to follow as a guide as they consider interim roles.

The first factor that was mentioned by over half of the participants involves asking questions to clarify information presented about the position or to obtain additional information by the person explaining the interim position. These questions may be broad and general, or tailored and specific. For example, Liz wanted to know the real length of time for the interim role. Jessica was adamant with questions about what the role would entail, or what it would not entail. Lastly, Lillian went on to add that:

> I think now I would spend a lot more time being like, what do I get out of this? How can I you know, in this interim position, how can I sort of make an impact? Am I just keeping the trains running? Or am I going to do some decision making? Is this long term? Is it short term? I would ask a lot more questions.

A crucial question to ask the supervisor/hiring manager should pertain to a person's exit strategy. Surprisingly, most of the participants did not inquire about this matter, leading me to believe they assumed that they would simply return to their prior role after they were no longer needed in their interim role. Lillian provided context for why it is important to ask about next steps at the end of the interim position:

> I think another thing that I didn't think about, and that ended up working out for me in the end, but was like, what's the exit strategy for the interim role, right? I think I'm operating under the assumption that hopefully I'll get the role. And so, I don't need an exit strategy. It'll just become hiring my replacement once it's official. But then when that wasn't the outcome, it was like, okay, so what, what happens when this is going to be done? Yeah, I think this could be a stepping-stone into the job. And then to really think about, what would it look like if you didn't get this role?

The participants had the benefit of hindsight to reflect on what they wish they would have known or asked about prior to accepting their interim role, and this information is useful for others in student affairs considering interim positions.

After learning more about the interim role by asking questions, follow-up questions, and hopefully getting satisfactory responses, the second factor mentioned by participants pertains to working with your supervisor/hiring manager to negotiate specific demands while operating in the interim role. This negotiation is not a "counteroffer" necessarily. Rather, these discussions

would involve asking the supervisor to address certain requirements prior to accepting the interim role. This step gives the potential interim an opportunity to advocate for themselves and their interests. For example, even though Felipe was the only participant to be given a position description outlining his roles and duties, he was given a lot of guarantees and promises of what would not be a part of that role. Ultimately, and unfortunately, those same items gradually ended up becoming part of his role. His narrative and Dr. K's were nearly identical, both firmly stating that they would want guarantees, a timeline, and assurances that things could proceed within a the outlined timeline for the position. These factors are reasonable and understandable so that interims can plan forward, especially given the circumstances of Dr. K, who after more than 2 years, is still in her interim role.

Another negotiable matter relates to the shared experience of inadequate compensation, a factor that was mentioned by all the participants. Andrew, who had served in an interim role before and was self-aware that the compensation is often not great, did advocate for more money, but his final salary still fell short of expectations. To address this matter, Louis provided a narrative regarding how an interim at his new institution utilized the art of negotiation and collaboration to get what both parties wanted. He stated:

> We made all of the decisions together. And then we put them back in writing when they agreed to it. So, we have sort of a contracted agreement. This person negotiated their salary. They negotiated their associate getting more money to come in as a temporary director. They negotiate things and the job that they would do and the things they would not do. The negotiating was just the most incredibly open process.

Getting information in writing and an outline of the position requirements makes the interim process operate more smoothly. This need for advanced negotiation of terms of the position was

reiterated by Dr. K who also provided narrative on the importance of negotiating more up front for job features such as compensation and resources. Jessica provided the humblest and most direct thoughts on why negotiating should not be feared or avoided. She stated: “Just being asked to fill the interim role is and was incredibly meaningful. They need you, and they asked you! They have the money.” While institutions may not be able to pay an interim the full salary of someone who is permanently in the role, there are other alternatives such as one-time, cash payments. If financial compensation is not an option or possible, negotiating for other perks such as extra vacation days is another strategy to employ.

The third factor that was mentioned by almost all the participants was the concept of engaging in self-reflection. After being asked to serve, asking questions, and negotiating, potential interims should have a better understanding of the position, expectations, duties, roles, timeline, and compensation. As such, potential interims need to use this information to ask themselves some questions pertaining to their career planning. Does this move make sense for their career? Does it align with their career goals? Is it the right time? Lillian added context by stating that:

> I mean, I think the first question that I would have would sort of be, you know, is this a role that you want? And is there is this a pathway for you to get it and get a gauge on that? Because I think that, that sort of sets the tone for the rest of the conversation, right? If someone's like, I was offered this gig, and I absolutely do not want this job, Right? Okay. So then, like, let's think and talk about how we can make this work for you as best we can.

Reflecting on key areas prior to accepting the interim role can affect how interims experience the new position and provide them an opportunity to articulate for themselves their motivation to saying yes to the interim offer.

Those contemplating whether to accept an interim role have a lot to consider. They must ask their supervisor broad and specific questions about the interim timeline, duties, and compensation. Next, they must not be afraid to negotiate and advocate for themselves, especially when it comes to financial compensation. The increased workload associated with interim roles may require more time being spent on the job, so asking for more compensation is logical and appropriate. This start of a conversation with supervisors may result in more questions being asked and answered. Lastly, those contemplating interim positions must engage in deep introspection and self-reflection to make the best, well-informed decision possible. While the ultimate decision to accept an interim role lies with the [potential] interim, two of the factors listed above, asking questions, and negotiating, involve the supervisor. This, it is imperative that hiring managers/supervisors be equally informed about the process, too.

Information for Hiring Managers and/or Supervisors

As previously indicated by the literature, some interim positions may be planned while others are unexpected, especially if someone departs without any or much notice. Thus, many of the implications and factors for those considering an interim role can also be applied to supervisors and hiring managers. For example, managers can take the self-reflection (internal) and asking questions and negotiating (external) factors to be self-reflective (internal) on who would be the best fit for the interim role and negotiate (external) with their supervisor for more compensation and as much information as possible pertaining to the role, its duties, and expectations. Supervisors and hiring managers must approach potential interims prepared with

more than just “an ask” or an offer. They must be prepared to answer their questions, be flexible, compromise, and negotiate with their top candidate(s). To be better prepared, supervisors can be aware of multiple factors such as anticipating questions, providing compensation, being flexible, and promoting self-care.

Anticipating Questions. Supervisors, who may also be in flux, or in an interim role themselves need to be prepared before offering an interim role to an employee. They must anticipate the questions they will likely encounter and have answers and responses at the ready. They need to give applicants/candidates as much information and understanding about what they are going into as possible. Additionally, even if time is short to fill an interim role quickly, hiring managers should not pressure, guilt, or manipulate someone into taking an interim role. One way to better equip supervisors and hiring managers is to provide them with training opportunities and resources that specifically pertain to the interim employees. Whether in crisis or not, this type of preparation can provide supervisors with information, context, and perspective to help them make informed decisions if and when they ever need to make a quick hiring decision. This also helps prepare a functional area or department for succession planning if decisions need to be made quickly.

Providing Compensation. The matter of compensation was a frequent theme throughout this study. Not to belabor the matter, but like it or not, supervisors and hiring managers need to be ready to address this with candidates and to be prepared to negotiate a final salary. Lillian previously explained how her institution’s 10% pay raise limit did not meet her expectations, and how she did not have the ability to negotiate because the 10% cap was an institutional policy. Even though Lillian was cognizant and realistic that she was not going to get 100% of the salary of the vacated position, she was doing 100% of the role, with only a 10% pay increase to her old

salary. The resulting pay gap between what the position typically had as a salary and what Lillian received due to the 10% policy limitation created tension for her in starting the position, and ultimately some longer-term resentment. When it comes to looking at institutional policies like this, what role can the supervisor or hiring manager have in changing this policy, especially during a time of crisis? Just as how the interim is likely to advocate for more money, can the supervisor advocate (to their supervisor) for more money to secure an interim? Other options, as previously mentioned, if a significant bump in salary is not possible, could involve the supervisor securing a one-time cash payment to the interim or additional vacation days.

Being Flexible. In unpredictable environments such as that evidenced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interims, as well as their supervisors, needed to be flexible with duties and ready to pivot to new working conditions quickly. Recommendations in a recent study indicated that in times of crisis communication and procedural flexibility are warranted (Schofield, 2022). We learned from Felipe, despite having a position description and an in-depth awareness of the services provided by his office, most of his duties changed over the course of his interim role as the pandemic continued. The limited time and capacity to adapt to new working conditions as an interim left little time to process and fully understand how to best adjust to respond to change. Including some professional development for leading during a crisis and leading as an interim could become a staple for supervisors to provide, which could help with providing strategies for flexibility (McClure et al., 2023) and comfort with ambiguity.

Promoting Self-Care. Finally, the concept of self-care should apply to all levels of the staff/team. Andrew and Louis mentioned how interim staff members looked to them for support and guidance. If the supervisor is burned out, that is what the staff will see, and they too will pick up this type of reaction when they approach situations. To address and combat this, supervisors

need to meet with their team members, especially those in interim roles, regularly. These meetings are not intended to micro-manage team members, rather to offer support, address concerns, and gauge how interims are feeling about their roles. This factor was supported by Andrew, who—even while joking about "having meetings for meetings about meetings"—often met with his team to learn about their needs and to provide the resources they needed to be successful. Supervisors who cared for their team by meeting with them regularly, publicly showed their care/concern by genuinely asking them how they were doing, and role-modeled self-care, themselves showcases their commitment to the organization, the team, and themselves all at once. Building a caring culture can help mitigate some of the stress felt during periods of crisis (McClure et al., 2023.) Essentially, helping others also helps themselves.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study adds to the limited body of research on motivation and interim leadership during times of crisis, future research on all these factors is required. The following recommendations for future research fall into two categories. The first set of recommendations involves factors about this study. If this exact study were to be done again, these are factors that I would change. The second set of recommendations contains factors that future researchers could employ to expand upon the original scope of this study.

Replicating This Study

If this study were to be replicated, there are a few things I would do differently to potentially increase the recruitment of participants and ensure continuous involvement of participants. First, conducting two interviews was time-consuming for me and likely the participants, as evident by Andrew's non-responsiveness for a second interview. Given that the second interview was only about half the time of the first interview, averaging about 20 minutes

in length, having only one interview would save time for both me as a researcher who had to coordinate logistics, and for the participants who had to schedule two interviews in secure/private locations.

Another small change would be to expand the criteria beyond Directors, Deans, and VPSAs to widen the applicant pool. After soliciting participants on various social-media platforms I received multiple responses and submissions from practitioners who served in an interim role, but not at Director, Dean, or VPSA level, including roles outside of student affairs such as an interim provost and interim dean for enrollment. Additionally, some of the participants, such as Felipe and Andrew, referred to working in departments with other interims who filled interim roles at subordinate levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Casting a wider net to collect more narratives could yield more findings for policy and practice implications. Related to that, only participants who said "yes" when asked to fill an interim role were interviewed. It remains unknown from a choice perspective for those who declined to take on an interim role thus opening another avenue of research. Additionally, while the use of a LinkedIn and a specific Facebook group with over 30,000 members were great platforms to use for the recruitment of participants, using other platforms and listservs such as American College Personnel Association or National Association of Student Personnel Administrators where student affairs practitioners are likely to be member are options. Lastly, pertaining to the interview protocol, expanding the timeline of the crisis beyond the dates used for this study could have led to additional participants.

Expanding Original Scope

In addition to the recommendations above, future researchers who seek to examine interim leadership, sources of motivation in seeking interim positions, and being an interim

during a crisis can use any number of new approaches, paradigms, frameworks, and methods. The one variable that may be difficult for researchers to account for is being in a state of crisis comparable to a global pandemic like COVID-19. While researchers could still explore longitudinal effects on career pathways for those serving in interim roles during a pandemic, other crises such as natural disasters or economic/fiscal exigencies can also be studied. When looking at new approaches, researchers can select and expand upon a specific component of interim leadership. For example, if exploring the influence of prior interim leadership, researchers can interview supervisors/hiring managers who have or have not ever served in an interim role to see how they compare when having to recruit, hire, and supervise interim employees. Would someone with prior interim experience have a different experience than someone without in their supervisory role? Would someone with prior interim experience work with interims they hire differently relative to others without this background?

Another possibility for future research would focus more on the effects of interim leadership on the organization and personnel. If the prior interim did not receive the regular position, researchers can focus on practitioners who moved into a full-time role after an interim had served in the position to examine how, if at all, the term/tenure of the previous interim impacted the department. Studying this, especially by interviewing those who the interim supervised, could give valuable insight into how the nature of supervision may change for all employees during an interim period. Lastly, another approach would be longitudinal in nature, by following-up with practitioners, especially younger professionals who had served in an interim role to see how, if at all, the interim experience has since impacted them. Findings from this study indicated that the older, more experienced professionals accepted the interim role for more altruistic reasons rather than the younger professionals who used it as stepping-stone. Would the

younger interims who once used the interim experience as a stepping-stone still be motivated for the same reasons or would there be different reasons or motivators?

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on student affairs administrators in higher education. At the onset of the pandemic institutions responded by suspending job searches and implementing hiring freezes for vacant positions. With no new administrators entering the institution student affairs departments filled vacancies, especially those at the VPSA, Dean, or Director level by promoting from within through internal interim appointments. Participants, like those in my study, were all asked by their supervisors to accept an interim role within their functional area. They were motivated to say "yes" to the interim offer for a variety of reasons. Some saw the interim role as an opportunity for professional development. Others accepted because they wanted to better serve their team and organization. Another accepted simply because she expected that she was going to be doing the interim role work anyway so why not have the title and modest pay raise that matched the duties and responsibilities of the role. Thus, the motivations for accepting the role were personal, selfless, or a combination of both.

The newer, younger professionals in this study were highly motivated by career development and achievement. They saw the interim opportunity, with its increased power and responsibilities, especially with supervision and budgetary duties, as a steppingstone in their career. Many still expressed a desire to form good relationships and to be influential to others in their organization, but these were secondary motivators. Despite the younger professionals being motivated by achievement, advancement, and access to opportunities, two of the three administrators who left their interim roles, and the field were in this younger professional group.

Being an interim during the COVID-19 pandemic was stressful. This stress was caused or exacerbated by compensation, unexpected duties and responsibilities, and the sacrifices endured

to physical and mental health. Keeping in mind that prior literature indicates that interim roles can be stressful, interim roles during an unpredictable time of crisis brought extra layers of stress, burnout, and feelings of exhaustion into the experience. The findings also indicated that men in this study were more vocal about the stress and is a matter that requires future inquiry and study.

Yet, despite the overwhelming stress and the physical and mental toll the interim experience had on participants, five of the seven participants indicated they would do the exact same interim experience again or another like it and approach it differently. The two participants (Andrew and Louis) who did not express a desire to do the experience again were both seasoned, experienced professionals. The other seasoned professional, Dr. K, is still in her interim role, thus suggesting that as an experienced professional you either love your role enough to stay in it for years or you step away from it because you do not need it. The source of motivation for seeking an interim role for the participants did not predict if the participant stayed in the field of higher education or if they left the field. Thus, achievement as a motivator did not align with the career trajectories of the participants within student affairs as three participants left the field. When applying this to the concept of vocational awe, which states that people are essentially "called" to their work (Ettarh, 2018), these results serve as a stark reminder that despite the love one may have for their profession and the people within in, staying in a role that has low pay and more demands for your time can result in quiet quitting and an exodus from the field.

Finally, all the participants were given a choice by their supervisor to accept the role and all participants were asked by their supervisor. A powerful implication for current and future supervisors is that one day in their role as a supervisor they may the person "doing the asking" to a potential interim. Thus, it would be beneficial for institutions to prepare future

leaders/supervisors on matters such as succession planning, and interim leadership. Training opportunities can also be concurrently developed to help prepare future interims and supervisors given the recent large increase in the number of interims serving in student affairs.

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Appendix A

LinkedIn & Facebook Post to Solicit Participants

To my colleagues in Student Affairs:

I am seeking participants for my qualitative dissertation study titled: "Motivations for Student Affairs Professionals Accepting an Interim Role During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Study." The purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of what motivated student affairs professionals to accept an interim role during the pandemic, and to convey the narratives of the participants' lived experiences. I invite those who served in an interim dean or director role within student affairs between March 2020 – May 2022 to participate in this study.

Interested participants are asked to complete a short survey (https://lnkd.in/gy2R5Jxp) to provide additional information regarding their responsibilities and experiences. Selected participants will be asked a series of semi-structured questions over two short Zoom recorded interviews.

Questions can be directed to me at tafassanella@wm.edu.

Please feel free to pass this study on to others who may be interested.

Thank you in advance!

Terry

Appendix B

Pre-Interview Demographic Questionnaire

Participant survey for interim leadership study

This study, titled, **Motivations for Student Affairs Professionals Accepting an Interim Role During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Study**, is designed to explore the motivation(s) for why administrators within Student Affairs decided to accept an interim leadership role during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to May 2022 by analyzing their lived experiences in the role. Being an interim leader and being in a period of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic are both temporary occurrences. Studying this group of administrators provides a collection of data that can only be described by those who have lived through the experience.

tafassanella@wm.edu Switch account

* Indicates required question

Email *

Your email

Name *

Your answer

Title of your interim position *

Your answer

How did you enter the interim role *

- [ ] I applied/volunteered
- [ ] I was asked to step into the role
- [ ] I was told I by a supervisor I had to fill this role
- [ ] Other:

How long did you serve in the interim role (in months) *

Your answer

Were either of these responsibilities part of your interim role *

- [ ] Budgetary
- [ ] Supervisory
- [ ] Neither were responsibilities

Were you given any of the following prior, during, or after your interim role *

- [ ] Position description
- [ ] Extra compensation
- [ ] Formal evaluation
- [ ] None of these were provided

If you are no longer in your interim role, where are you now *

- [ ] Interim role became a permanent position
- [ ] Back in prior position
- [ ] In a different job at the university (neither interim or prior role)
- [ ] At a new job at another university
- [ ] Left higher education
- [ ] Other: _____

A copy of your responses will be emailed to the address you provided.

Submit Clear form

Appendix C

Research Participation Consent Form

Motivations for Student Affairs Professionals Accepting an Interim Role during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Study

Purpose of the Study
This study, titled, **Motivations for Student Affairs Professionals Accepting an Interim Role during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Study**, is designed to explore the motivation(s) for why administrators within Student Affairs decided to accept an interim leadership role during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to September 2022 by analyzing their lived experiences in the role.

Importance of Your Participation
Being an interim leader and being in a period of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic are both temporary occurrences. Studying this group of administrators provides a collection of data that can only be described by those who have lived through the experience.

Who is the Researcher?
This study is a dissertation topic for a Ph.D. student within the William & Mary School of Education Educational Policy, Planning & Leadership (EPPL) program.

How You Were Selected
You were identified as someone who currently is or previously was in an interim within the office/division of Student Affairs at your institution. This study will include between 7 to 10 total participants from administrators serving in higher education institutions.

What I Will Request of You
- Conduct two interviews, in person if geographically possible, or via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype or telephone, according to the participant's preference between June of 2022 and September of 2022.
- A demographic survey will be sent to the participant to complete prior to the first interview.
- The initial interview will take about 45 minutes to complete, and will include questions about your interim role, the motivation(s) for why you accepted the role, and about your lived experiences in the role.
- A follow-up interview will be conducted a few weeks later. This interview will take less time to complete. A follow-up prompt between the first and second interviews will be asked to expand upon a salient point or topic from the first interview.
- If available, a copy of your interim position description would be helpful after the first interview.
- With your permission, I would also like to audio-record the interview.

Additional Information

Please know that:

- The confidentiality of your personally identifying information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. A Box folder will be used to store all information.
- Your name and other identifiable information such as your institution, office/department, and title will be known only to the researcher through the information that you provide.
- Neither your name nor any other personally identifiable information will be used in any presentation or published work without prior written consent.
- There may be a possibility that the researcher will have a preexisting professional relationship with a participant, their supervisor, or subordinate(s).
- The audio recordings of the interviews described above will be erased after the study is complete and/or if you opt out of the study at any point.
- You may refuse to answer any questions during the interview, if you so choose. You may also terminate your participation in the study at any time. To do so simply inform the interviewer of your intention. Neither of these actions will incur a penalty of any type.
- Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.
- There is no compensation for participating in this study.
- A summary of the results of the study will be sent to you electronically once they are complete.
- There are no foreseeable risks in study participation.

How Can You Contact Me?

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the interviewer:

Terry Fassanella (tafassanella@wm.edu)

If you have additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact anonymously if you wish, Dr. Cindy Corbett at 757-221-3966 (cacorb@wm.edu), chair of the William & Mary committee that supervises the treatment of study participants.

By checking the "I agree to participate" response below, then signing and sating this form, you will indicate your voluntary agreement to participant in this study and confirm that you are at least 18 years of age.

I agree to participate.

I do not agree to participate.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Signatures

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D

Prompt to Participants Prior to Second Interview

Participant Follow-Up Prompt & Voluntary Questions

This study, titled, **Motivations for Student Affairs Professionals Accepting an Interim Role During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Study**, is designed to explore the motivation(s) for why administrators within Student Affairs decided to accept an interim leadership role during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to May 2022 by analyzing their lived experiences in the role. Being an interim leader and being in a period of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic are both temporary occurrences. Studying this group of administrators provides a collection of data that can only be described by those who have lived through the experience.

Email *

Valid email

This form is collecting emails. Change settings

Name *

Short answer text

Please select a pseudonym - (To be used in place of your real name) *

Short answer text

Follow-Up Prompt: In your first interview you spoke of some of your motivations for why you accepted the interim role. Of the motivators listed below, please indicate which (if any) most led to you accepting the interim role. *

- Achievement: Desire to do something successfully. Takes risks and values feedback.
- Power: Desires status and recognition. Wants to be influential and impactful to others.
- Affiliation: Desires sense of belonging to organization. Wants relationships and to be liked.
- None of these describe my motivation for accepting the interim role

Voluntary Question: Gender

Short answer text

Voluntary Question: Age

Short answer text

Appendix E

Semi-Structured Questions for First Interview

1) How long have you worked in higher education?

2) Describe your career path in student affairs.

3) What led you to your functional area?

4) How long have you worked or did work at your current or last institution?

5) How long had you been working professionally at your current institution prior to taking on the interim role?

6) Title of your prior position (before the interim)

7) Did you have supervisory and/or budgetary responsibilities in your previous role?

8) Would you please describe your interim experience during the pandemic?

9) How were you asked to take on the interim role?
    a. Were you asked? Were you told?

10) What were your duties and responsibilities while in the interim role?
    a. How were these duties and responsibilities explained to you?

    b. Did you have any say in the duties and responsibilities?

11) Did your roles and duties significantly change while in this interim role?

12) What kind of authority, if any, did you have in this interim role?

    a. In the demographic survey you indicated that you did/did not have supervisory and/or budgetary oversight; are those functions normally associated with someone who is in this role permanently?

13) How, if at all, did your sense of power change throughout the transition to the interim role?

14) How did serving in this experience make you feel as a practitioner?

15) How did the interim role make you feel as a professional?
    a. Did serving as an interim expand your professional development?

16) What, if any, were your accomplishments and achievements while in the interim role?
    a. What did it take to accomplish tasks? If you did not feel like you accomplished things what do you think were barriers?

17) What motivated you to accept the interim position?
    a. Was there something (or a bunch of things) that attracted you to the role?

18) How, if at all, did you feel supported or not by colleagues and/or your supervisor?
    a. How (if at all) did the interim role change your relationships in the organization?

19) How, if at all, has the interim role affected your status within your organization?

20) Anything else to add?

Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Second Interview

1) In the follow-up survey you ranked <say the one they selected> as being the most impactful motivator for accepting the interim role. I wanted to offer an opportunity to expand upon that and/or to touch on the other motivators, too.

    a. Achievement: Desire to do something successfully. Takes risks and values feedback.
    b. Power: Desires status and recognition. Wants to be influential and impactful to others.
    c. Affiliation: Desires sense of belonging to organization. Wants relationships and to be liked.
    d. None of these describe my motivations for accepting the interim role.

2) Can you tell me more about why you selected the choice you did? What did you consider when making this selection?

3) What do you know now, from having served in an interim role, that you wish you knew before you accepted the interim role?

4) If you were ever presented with an opportunity to serve in interim role again, what would you need to consider prior to accepting, or, would you never serve again?

5) If a colleague or friend told you they were offered an interim role, what advice would you give to them?

6) Had it not been a pandemic, do you think your interim experience would have been different? Why or why not?

Appendix G

A Priori Codes

1) Achievement
2) Power
3) Affiliation
4) Advancement
5) Fulfillment
6) Accomplishment

VITA

Terence A. Fassanella

tafassanella@wm.edu

EDUCATION

William & Mary — **Williamsburg, VA**

Ph.D., Educational Policy Planning, & Leadership — *May 2024*

University of Dayton — **Dayton, OH**

M.S. Education and Allied Professions — *May 2005*

Niagara University — **Lewiston, NY**

M.S. Criminal Justice Administration — *May 2003*

B.A. Psychology & Criminology — *May 2002*

PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

William & Mary — **Williamsburg, VA**

Senior Compliance & Title IX Investigator — *October 2022 – Present*

Assistant Dean, Community Values & Restorative Practices — *June 2021 – October 2022*

Interim Director of CVRP — *August 2020 – June 2021*

Assistant Director of First-Year Experience — *July 2017 – August 2020*

Area Director, Residence Life — *July 2009 – July 2017*

Christopher Newport University — **Newport News, VA**

Hall Director — *June 2007 – July 2009*

University of North Carolina, Charlotte — **Charlotte, NC**

Residence Coordinator — *August 2005 – June 2007*