

GRIT AND PERSISTENCE IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

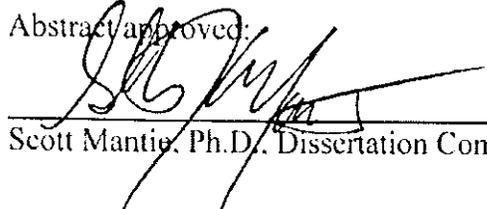
AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Matthew J. Salter for the degree of Doctor of Education in Higher Education

Presented on March 25, 2021

Title: The Efficacy of Grit as a Factor of Persistence in Master's Prepared Student Affairs Professionals

Abstract approved:



Scott Mantie, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee Chair

The purpose of this study was to determine if an individual's level of grit can serve as a factor of persistence in master's prepared student affairs professionals in the higher education profession. While research exists on burnout and why people leave the field of student affairs, this study sought to explore if grit is a factor in persistence or longevity. There was significant difference in the grit scores, with respondents who plan to stay in the field of student affairs and higher education having higher grit scores than those individuals who are unsure of what their future plans are. Significant differences in grit scores also existed between females and males, with those who identified as female having higher grit scores. There was a significant difference in the grit scores, with those participants from both Connecticut and New Hampshire having higher grit scores than student affairs practitioners from Maine. The small sample size from Maine could lead to a sampling error in these findings. Individuals who plan to remain in the student affairs field may be grittier than individuals who are indifferent to remaining in the field.

Keywords: burnout, grit, longevity, persistence, student affairs

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GRIT AND PERSISTENCE IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

The Efficacy of Grit as a Factor of Persistence in Master's Prepared Student Affairs
Professionals

By

Matthew J. Salter

A DISSERTATION

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GRIT AND PERSISTENCE IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

Dissertation of Matthew .I. Salter

Presented on March 25, 2021

Approved:



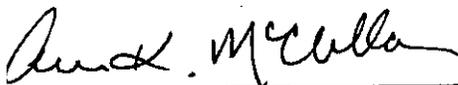
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Doctor of Education: Higher Education

The Efficacy of Grit as a Factor of Persistence in Master's Prepared Student Affairs Professionals

Matthew J. Salter, Plymouth State University

Dissertation Defense: March 25, 2021

Executive Summary: March 25, 2021

Introduction: The purpose of this study was to determine if an individual's level of grit can serve as a factor of persistence in master's prepared student affairs professionals in the higher education profession.

Problem of Practice: The problem of practice is that there are a large number of master's prepared student affairs professionals who leave the field within 5 years of obtaining their master's degree. Previous research has focused on why individuals leave the field, but this study focused on potential traits that factor into persistence.

Research Method: This was a quantitative study that measured grit using the grit scale developed by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) and with added demographic questions (Appendix B). Participants in this study were 92 master's prepared student affairs professionals working in the Northeast United States.

Summary of Findings: Statistically significant differences were found in grit scores between those who plan to remain working in student affairs having higher grit scores compared to those who did not know what their future plans were. Significant differences in grit scores were also seen between participants who identified as females (higher scores) and those identifying as males. Respondents who planned to stay in the field 2 years and 6 years both had significantly higher grit scores than those planning to stay for 5 years. Significant differences in grit scores were also seen with those in both Connecticut and New Hampshire having higher grit scores than those living in Maine.

Limitation(s) of Study: The study was only able to analyze the results of those participants who completed the survey. If more participants had responded, more data would have been reviewed. Additionally, as only a region was studied, the findings of the study may not be generalizable to other regions of the country or internationally.

Implications/Significance of Study: Findings from this study indicated that master's prepared student affairs professionals with higher grit scores were more focused on staying in the field; therefore, further research should be conducted to determine how to increase grit of entry-level student affairs employees.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for their love and support as I completed this journey. To my wife, Heather who I love completely and who values education as much as me, thank you for always believing in me. Heather and I began our journey together at Gettysburg College and there is no better partner or supporter that I could have found. To my oldest son AJ whose laughter and love of baseball continually warms my heart. I promised that I would finish this dissertation before you started kindergarten and I kept my promise. To my youngest son Niles, who has had many health challenges in his short life but teaches me how to fight through adversity daily. To my parents and brother who are always there for me. And finally, to my friends and colleagues who have been here for me on this journey and have listened to me speak way too often about my research—thank you for your support!

Chapter 1: Introduction

In higher education in the United States, those who work in student affairs are often directly interacting with students in positions in residential life, admissions, student life, Greek life, athletics, and other departments known collectively as student affairs. These professionals work to enhance a student's growth and development during their college experience through opportunities outside of the classroom while complementing their academics. Many of those individuals who enter student affairs earn a master's degree in higher education administration, student affairs, counseling, or other related topics. Yet, only 40% of those working in student affairs reach their fifth and/or sixth year of employment after earning a master's degree in the field (Frank, 2013; Herr & Strange, 1985). Those who persist in the profession likely learn that "it's doing what you love, but not just falling in love—staying in love" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 54). A continued feeling of satisfaction and appreciation towards one's work is a sign of fulfillment with one's occupation. This is the foundation of the idea of grit, which is defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). This statement seems to apply to many who enter the field of student affairs, as they enter to help students grow and develop. One would assume that those who stay working in the field love what they do, which creates this longevity. As such, grit may be an indicator of longevity in the field of student affairs. For the purposes of this research longevity and persistence are used interchangeably. Those who stay in love with what they do are likely to stay in the profession for more than 6 years after earning their master's degree and, with this greater experience, to be better supporters for college students.

Much has been discussed as to why trained employees leave student affairs due to burnout and other factors (Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregory, 2005), yet little has been done to learn why individuals stay in the field. In learning why some individuals persist in student affairs, can one predict those who will be successful in the career and nurture new employees to gain this skillset? Perhaps knowing these traits or skills will allow for more robust graduate programs and curriculum that prepares future student affairs practitioners for success.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Many members of a college community impact students during their time attending an institution of higher education. In the classroom, faculty play a central role in instruction and learning. Outside of the classroom, dedicated professionals from the field of student affairs support and create opportunities for student development and growth. While students in the K-12 setting spend most of the day in school or class, this is not the case for the majority of students in college. Out-of-the-classroom experiences are a major aspect of their collegiate life. Those who enter the field of student affairs receive training from their own undergraduate experiences (e.g., serving as tour guides, resident assistants, members and leaders of clubs or Greek life), while many complement this knowledge with a master's level graduate degree. Some of these individuals further progress to earn doctoral degrees, and my study is interested in those who entered student affairs or have remained in the field and have earned a master's degree in a program directly related to higher education, student affairs, college student personnel, or a related course of study. Those professionals who are employed in student affairs come from different backgrounds

and experiences and start their careers in different departments: residential life, athletics, admissions, student activities, and others.

Research suggests that student affairs has a high rate of turnover due to individuals leaving the profession (Frank, 2013; Herr & Strange, 1985), yet it is unclear what individual characteristic, if any, impact one's persistence in the profession. In speaking about this persistence with Dr. Benedetti at Plymouth State University, it was suggested that the construct of grit would be worth exploring (C. Benedetti, personal communication, July 2018). In researching grit further, grit stood out as a potentially undiscovered characteristic with regard to longevity in the field as viewed through individuals' persistence in the career of student affairs. Although not implicitly related, strikingly, 40% of students who begin 4-year degrees do not persist to graduation by the end of 6 years (United States Department of Education, 2016). As both student affairs staff and students at institutions exhibit high rates of departure, by identifying traits that help professionals persist and ultimately improving this persistence for employees, we may see an impact on students with regard to resiliency as well. Yet, even if we do not see this, any good employer would want to seek to find ways to build a staff who are happy and have a desire to continue working with and having a positive impact upon students. The purpose of this study was to determine if an individual's level of grit can serve as a factor of persistence in master's prepared student affairs professionals in the higher education profession.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was essential to identify, as it set the structure for the research conducted. Additionally, it impacted the research questions of this work and helped to influence the design of the study. The constructs that built the

foundation for the conceptual framework in this study were the concepts of burnout, persistence, and longevity among those who work in student affairs. *Burnout* is a term defined by Freudenberger (1974) as to become worn out and to have exhaustion due to demands for energy and resources. This is not a single-day occurrence but a feeling that forms over time. *Persistence* is defined as moving beyond these individual occurrences and not letting them accumulate into burnout. Burnout, persistence, and longevity are all constructs that influence the conceptual framework of grit (Duckworth et al., 2007). Similar to the construct of burnout, grit is not a one-time feeling but instead a sensation that builds over time. By studying the levels of grit in relation to burnout levels that exist amongst student affairs professionals, it was hypothesized that this research would be able to determine if grit is a factor in longevity in the profession.

Research Questions

- 1) What impact does grit play in the persistence of master's prepared student affairs employees in the profession?
- 2) Is grit a predictor of longevity in master's prepared professionals working in student affairs?

Research Design and Methodology

To address the research problem and questions Surveys were conducted using members of American College Personnel Association: College Student Educators International (ACPA). This organization is recognized as one of the leading professional organizations for student affairs professionals from all different types of offices within the field. After receiving IRB approval, the researcher applied for and received approval to distribute the survey for this research through ACPA. The

surveys were then distributed to master's prepared student affairs employees who are self-declared new professionals or mid-level professionals. Although it is estimated that 180,100 individuals work in the field of student affairs (United States Department of Labor, 2018), the membership numbers of ACPA are around 7,500 (ACPA, "Who We Are," 2021). The survey was distributed by ACPA to 268 entry and mid-level professionals in the New England region on Wednesday, December 4, 2019 with a reminder sent on Tuesday, December 17, 2019. Additional follow-up was performed over social media via Facebook and through sharing by professional colleagues in an attempt to increase the number of respondents. A survey instrument was used in this study, which was appropriate as surveys are meant to collect information from a broad range of subjects about how people behave and act (Fink, 2003). The Grit Scale (Duckworth et al., 2007) was used to measure grit, and supplemental demographic questions were collected by the researcher to facilitate addressing the research questions. The Grit-S survey was selected in order to collect the data that would answer the research questions for this study. After this data was collected, the quantitative results were analyzed for significance by differences.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of survey research is that the participants may answer questions with how they want to be perceived, rather than their lived experiences. Thus, they may receive a higher or lower grit score on the Grit Scale than they actually should. Because the research focused on the New England region, a limitation may exist in generalizing the data for other regions of the country. A final limitation is that by using professional organizations to survey participants, the research might have missed those who may not be members of these groups. To deal with this limitation,

the survey was further shared on Facebook in New England-based groups that consist of student affairs professionals.

Definitions of Key Terms

Burnout: To become worn out and to have exhaustion due to demands for energy and resources (Freudenberger, 1974).

Entry-Level: Position obtained post-master's degree and having less than 5 years of professional experience.

Experienced Student Affairs Employee: One who has been in the field for more than 5 years.

Graduate Programs: A course of study where the end results is a master's degree in a field related to student affairs and higher education administration.

Grit: "Perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087).

Persistence: Remaining in the field of student affairs or one's longevity in the career.

Significant Difference: "Conclusion that the results of a study would be unlikely if in fact there were no difference in the populations the samples represent" (Aron & Aron, 2003, p. 683)

Student Affairs: Offices with direct student contact that are not primarily for teaching and instruction. These offices include: Academic Advising, Admissions, Alumni/Parent Programming, Athletics, Bursar/Student Accounts, Career Advising, Development/Fundraising, Financial Aid, Greek Life and Student Leadership, Orientation, Recreational Sports, Residential Life/Housing Services, Safety and Security, Student Activities, Student Conduct/Community Standards, and Title IX.

Summary

There is considerable research focusing on why employees leave the field of student affairs (Brewer & Clippard, 2002; Frank, 2013; Tull, 2006). While this is important to understand, it is also important to determine why people stay in the field. This is key, as understanding why some stay in the field will help employers focus hiring efforts on individuals with these qualities. What can supervisors do to build on persistence and passion to better keep their team engaged and excited about their work? Persistence and perseverance through grit may be the factor that determines the likelihood of an employee lasting past the 5- or 6-year employment mark. If grit is a factor of longevity, this allows supervisors to make better hiring decisions and to work with their supervisees to better persist.

It is known that less than 40% of employees in student affairs make it to 6 years (Frank, 2013; Herr & Strange, 1985). This statistic deserves follow-up as to the causes, especially as many of these employees have specialty degrees in the field. It is a problem because institutions are unable to build consistencies in their staff to best support students, and those who gain knowledge about how to support students keep leaving instead of passing down their skills. From an institutional perspective, it is also a very costly process to continually replace the staff who have been trained as they burn out and leave. In a study outside of the education sector, Kacmar, Andrews, Van Rooy, Steilberg, and Cerrone (2006) found that when managers leave positions, entry level employees are more likely to turn over as well because they are more loyal to the manager than the organization. The turnover of one employee may lead to further departures throughout the rank and file of employees. Utilizing a survey, the researcher in this dissertation examined if grit is a factor of persistence and what if any

general influence it has on the profession of student affairs. The hope was to use the results of this study to better the field of student affairs and to mentor and support a workforce that can focus on what matters↓our students.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Higher education curricula began in Europe as institutions of learning where the sole purpose of attending was to acquire a classical perspective of knowledge based on the concept of the liberal arts (Thelin, 2011). This focused a student's scholarship on Latin, rhetoric (narration, description, exposition, and argumentation), and other knowledge that was thought to be needed for the educated class of society. Although institutions in the United States have progressed since this founding, the influences of history still resonate in colleges and universities today.

The Beginning of American Higher Education

The history of higher education in America is rooted in historical European ideals. The focus of the first universities perpetuated the idea that learned scholars needed the seven liberal arts of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and the quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, music, astronomy) which were rooted in ancient Greece (Rice, 2006). The men who learned the liberal arts were receiving preparation to become religious leaders, which was the purpose of this early education (Geiger, 2015). As the nation moved forward, residential colleges came into existence as well as a divide between public and private colleges and universities. However, the biggest shift occurred when society began believing that the collegiate experience should be open to all and not just a place for wealthy White men (Geiger, 2015).

Harvard was founded in 1630 and although other institutions were attempted in Virginia, Harvard was the first institution to enjoy sustained success (Adams, 1887). Morison (1928) states that the University was founded to develop leaders for the Church and State, which at that time was the British government. The purpose of higher education in those early years was to prepare those who were to lead others.

There was no desire to increase the knowledge of ordinary citizens or to educate them. For those fortunate enough (mostly wealthy White men) to receive an education, the focus was on academics and no thought was given to activities outside the classroom. Nor was there an impetus to educate Black or women students, meaning that the country was only preparing White males to lead the church and government. At this time, a student's life was in the classroom and student affairs was not yet an occupation.

The Origins of Student Affairs

As the role of the college and university shifted to educating a greater proportion of the populace, so has the importance of educating students outside of the classroom (Thelin, 2011). Student affairs has a distinctive definition at each institution, but essentially covers the college personnel who support students in their non-academic pursuits. Nuss (2003) states that student affairs work has always been about the development of the whole person, and that is what practitioners have consistently focused on. Although an emphasis exists on what student affairs does, no similar attention seems apparent in how professionals obtain the skills needed to develop the whole student. Typically student affairs covers a wide array of offices and student support personnel working to complement a student's academics with out-of-the-classroom experiences and opportunities. These connections outside the classroom often lead to the overall development of students. Research on these activities by students supports the idea that students develop through all their collegiate experiences, not just those that are academically based.

Partnerships with educators in learning, advising, and co-curricular settings that prompt creation of the internal compass are central to

making the most of existing challenges during college life. They are also central to creating appropriate challenges in a setting where learning and the mistakes that are inherently part of it are less costly than in life after college (Baxter Magolda, 2003, p. 246).

As students confront these challenges they grow as individuals, learning about themselves and building a background that prepares them for obstacles both in college and beyond.

Originally student affairs offices were created to deal with student discipline issues, but they have morphed over the years, increasing in breadth with specialties in admissions, access, athletics, student activities, and residential life, amongst many other areas (Thelin, 2011). The development of the student affairs field can be traced to the first residential colleges in Colonial times (Nuss, 2003). As students were living on campus it was up to administrators to deal with discipline and other issues. In the 1800s with the passage of the Morrill Acts, which provided land to states for agriculturally-based colleges, the student population grew exponentially; athletics and Greek life began appearing on college campuses (Nuss, 2003). Faculty were not typically the individuals running these programs and as such administrators were hired to perform the work. Although some positions outside of the classroom existed previously (e.g., non-academic deans), early institutions did not consider these non-academic positions to be a collective discipline. Nuss (2003) traces the true start of student affairs to the early part of the twentieth century as a method to deal with student unrest and discipline issues, which expanded further to other focus areas. Since its inception, the field of student affairs has expanded greatly, yet there are still

no guidelines that exist on how to train these individuals working in the field. An example of this expansion are community service offices on campus that assist students in giving back to their local communities and plan service trips for students during college breaks. Student affairs professionals work to provide programming and support that complements the student experience and the educational endeavors of the institution.

Graduate Degree Preparation in Student Affairs

There are many paths to entering the field of student affairs. Some enter it immediately after earning a bachelor's degree while others may have transferable professional experience from other industries. As student affairs has grown as a profession, a niche was created wherein master's degree programs were taught with a focus on higher education administration and student affairs (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). These programs are known by many names and there is no set curriculum that is required to be taught or that must be completed (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). Each institution establishes its curriculum based on what they believe should be taught and what outcomes they believe their students need to earn a degree in the field. Passion for the profession and working with students are often mentioned by candidates who apply to these graduate programs; however, these are soft skills that would be difficult to teach through traditional coursework.

It has been suggested that the mere act of attending graduate school can change an individual's outlook on life and that many of the learning paradigms for undergraduate students hold true at the graduate level (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). However, this experience is even more individualized than the undergraduate experience (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). Graduate programs are often structured so

that students gain proficiency in a subject, but can neglect the students' needs outside of the classroom (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). A course taken in almost every curriculum for student affairs practitioners revolves around student development and ranges from Chickering's theories to the theory of self-authorship and, more recently, multicultural theories of development (Abes, Jones, & Stewart, 2019). These theories provide some basic context for how college students develop as adults. Thus, it can be extrapolated that although students in these programs are learning theory, they do not see examples of connection outside of class in their own education.

Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) looked at graduate programs that prepared students for careers in student affairs and found that many student affairs practitioners who participated in their study had trouble with the transition from graduate student to professional with regard to the expectations and responsibilities of their new professional role. Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) also state that new professionals wished their faculty members had prepared them better for continual professional development once they were employed, how to supervise other professionals, and how to manage budgets. It does not appear that these preparatory programs concentrate on how professionals can maintain their passion and perseverance to remain in the field beyond their first few years after leaving graduate school. The researchers found a disconnect between faculty's perception of what students needed in comparison to employers' perception for these entry-level student affairs employees. Dickerson et al. (2011) determined that according to faculty, individuals leaving master's degree programs in student affairs were more prepared to begin their employment than those who were hiring them. This could be a bias on the part of faculty, reflecting a belief

that their program teaches exactly what students need, or it could be that employers are biased in thinking that new professionals are not prepared for a job that the employer held previously.

Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Molina (2009) state that “college student personnel graduates needed to learn a wide range of skills, including those related to counseling and administration, if they were to be effective in their chosen profession” (p. 104). Student development theory is a hallmark of many student affairs graduate programs, yet 26% of professionals say they never use these theories they learned in graduate school (Cuyjet et al., 2009). This finding indicates that focusing on theory may be a misguided approach to preparing student affairs professionals. Walple (2006) states that it is now thought that the best way to prepare practitioners is through an academic course load focusing on student affairs. But as all student affairs programs seem to prepare practitioners differently, it is challenging to say if they truly are the best avenue to prepare one for this career.

Professional organizations.

As student affairs has grown into a profession, professional organizations formed as a way for those working in the field to connect with others and to obtain professional development. These organizations wield a significant amount of influence, and service to the national organization can be a resume booster for individuals during job searches. The two largest organizations in the United States are ACPA College Student Educators International and NASPA (not an acronym) Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Like many organizations, both of these groups hold international and regional conferences for their members. These organizations cover all aspects of student affairs, though neither seems to define

student affairs in a specific way. In addition, many functional areas of student affairs have their own professional organization; for example, NACAC (National Association for College Admission Counseling) and ASCA (Association of Student Conduct Administrators).

There is no set licensure or requirement for those who desire to enter the field of student affairs; however, NASPA and ACPA teamed up in 2010 and defined core competencies for those working in student affairs, further refined in 2015 (ACPA College Student Educators International & NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015). See Appendix A for more information. These core competencies cover a plethora of student affairs functional areas and the work done by individuals within those areas. However, it is remarkable that many of the competencies identified by these two organizations focus solely on developing the student, but not on the well-being of the employee or staff member. Focusing on students' development and persistence is important, but failing to do so for the team working with the students as well is a glaring discrepancy.

Another organization that produces standards for student affairs and student development within departments is CAS (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education). During the 1980s this organization put out a list of 60 learning outcomes for higher education graduate programs (Young & Janosik, 2007). Young and Janosik (2007) surveyed graduates of higher education and student affairs programs and found that those who were in CAS-compliant programs felt more confident about their professional work. This is interesting because many individual departments in student affairs review themselves with CAS standards as a way of

examining best practices. However, in descriptions of graduate programs to enroll in, it is uncommon to see a statement that the curriculum was developed using the CAS standards (Young & Janosik, 2007).

Research design and counseling skills are among the aspects suggested by CAS as needed in these programs, but according to Kretovics (2002) employers themselves are not looking for these skills. It is logical that research skills are used for a capstone or concluding project for the degree, but such skills are less needed on a day-to-day basis by student affairs employees. However, it is surprising that counseling is not identified as a skill valued by employers, as the issues that students deal with often require at least some counseling skills on the part of the student affairs professional working with them. Kretovics (2002) stated that even though counseling techniques by themselves were not valued, employers recognized helping skills as an important area for employees to be trained in. Young and Janosik (2007) highlighted the confidence felt by graduates of CAS-compliant programs, but are these really the skills that professionals need to be successful in the field?

These competencies are a starting point, and if professional organizations believe them to be essential skills for student affairs employees, then by and large they should be seen in the field because it would be natural for employees to acquire the skills while they are in graduate programs. However, if these are not the competencies that master's degree programs focus on, then it is likely that many working in student affairs are not proficient in these areas. This lack of a specific curriculum or desired learning outcomes may lead to disjointed and varying quality of preparation for those earning a master's degree in student affairs.

Although professional organizations created the previous competencies with some review of the literature, the documents describing them are not themselves a research-based study. However, this does not mean that research has not been conducted on the topic. Walple (2006) conducted a survey study of entry-level professionals and found that they often used three skills on the job that they did not obtain in their graduate prep: supervision, strategic planning, and budgeting. Yet their graduate programs were focused on studies in research methods, history of higher education, and history of student affairs (Walple, 2006). Those working in student affairs are practitioners and not lecturers, yet the curriculum highlighted by Walple (2006) suggests that what they are learning seems to be intended to prepare them for an academic journey. How do we move away from teaching rote memorization and toward helping those entering the field to hone their grit through perseverance and passion for working with college students?

An idea to explore is what skills, training, and knowledge are needed for a successful and lengthy career in student affairs and how an individual obtains these skills. Lovell and Kosten (2000) reviewed 30 years of studies and found that the successful student affairs employee had skills in “administration, management, and human facilitation; knowledge of student development theory and functional responsibilities of traits of personal integrity and cooperation” (p. 553). Unlike the other studies reviewed so far, this research postulates that student development theory is a key trait, which contrasts with the idea that on-the-job training is really what practitioners need for success. Lovell and Kosten (2000) also contend that assessment skills are needed for student affairs members to demonstrate the work they do and

justify their departments. This assessment would range from showing that a department's learning outcomes are being met based on student responses to demonstrating that students are progressing in their development as intended by the institution. The study is more than 20 years old, and today practitioners still are not learning skills in assessment while they are in graduate school, suggesting that they are inadequately prepared to assess the work they perform and justify the impact of their departments on the broader student experience.

Curriculum of Higher Education and Student Affairs Master's Programs

Diversity and social justice have become keywords in the field of student affairs as programs seek to prepare student affairs professionals to work with students of all backgrounds and with a representation that more equitably matches the United States population. In the early 1900s, Black land grant colleges received \$138 per student while land grant institutions received \$234 per student (Kujovich, 1993). This unequal funding contributed to a disparity in education opportunities for students that was based on race. Kujovich (1993) suggests that the end of the separate but equal laws in the 1950s started to even the playing field for the races, but Black students were still at a disadvantage compared to their White counterparts. Efforts are still underway today to create more inclusive environments in higher education even though these institutions are not always ready for the needs of multicultural students.

Flowers (2003) reviewed the curriculum for master's level programs in student affairs and found that 74% of those studied did require some sort of diversity class to complete the program. The research suggested that programs lacking this component may integrate diversity throughout all their courses (Flowers, 2003). From the researcher's personal experience, at institutions in the Northeast that are in small

cities, students from ethnic backgrounds can struggle to find food that fits their culture, personal hygiene products, and even a barber who knows how to cut their hair. It is prodigious for colleges to increase the diversity of their student body, but these students may suffer when they enter an environment that cannot support them by not understanding that they may have different needs based on their individual and cultural backgrounds.

In 2020 it was estimated that 40% of the United States population would be persons of color (Gayles & Kelly, 2007). Historically, those students from underrepresented populations have lower persistence rates and take longer than their peers to graduate from institutions of higher education (United States Department of Education, 2011). In order to better support students from diverse backgrounds, training diversity skills in graduate programs will increase in importance so that student affairs practitioners can best serve all students, including the underserved. Gayles and Kelly (2007) found that when a graduate school did not require a diversity component, many students learned it outside of the classroom and some found this to be a more organic method of learning. Students who were learning competencies around diversity in the classroom wanted to know more than just what different groups were feeling. They wanted a stronger understanding of how knowledge about oppression and multiple identities could be translated into best practice (Gayles & Kelly, 2007). Diversity training seems to follow the same model as other topics: when it is taught students feel that they know the content, but not necessarily how to use it in the workplace. This flaw of focusing on topics in graduate programs that do not prepare practitioners for real world work continues to appear throughout this research.

Moving Beyond Competency-Based Education

A focus in these programs could shift from classroom learning to active training on the job during one's graduate assistantship. It is common for full-time students in higher education programs to take on an assistantship for financial and professional experience, yet it is rare to connect this practice with classroom learning. Kuh (2009) suggests that we look first and foremost at student engagement, which he defines as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). When students are engaged outside the classroom, it likely increases the chances that they will persist to their second year and to degree completion. Training those working in student affairs in how to best engage students should pay dividends in retention efforts. How do we prepare those entering the field of student affairs with the correct tools in their toolbox to meet with undergraduates and help them become engaged with the institution? This could be the key to a successful career in student affairs, but do master's degree programs teach *how* to do this or only that it is important?

The emphasis so far has been on the knowledge versus competencies gained by professionals as they obtain their master's degree, yet many employers and student affairs workers point to their job as the place they learned skills as they grew in the profession (Kuk et al., 2007). According to the CAS standards, an individual should have over 300 hours of practice in at least two different offices, yet the standards fail to spell out how to make this a quality experience (Kuk et al., 2007). While one graduate student might be treated like a full-time professional, another could be in charge of collating paperwork. How do we make these experiences equitable? Kuk et

al. (2007) found that faculty teaching in higher education programs had different beliefs about what should be taught compared to mid- and senior level managers in student affairs. This suggests that a change in focus to preparing professionals with experiences out of the classroom in direct supervision, guidance, and mentorship could be more beneficial for training new professionals than programs rooted in theory and classroom learning. Perhaps a student affairs apprenticeship program would better prepare those entering the field. This type of program could also become more relevant if faculty were to better connect the experiences these students have in their assistantships with the ideas they learn in the classroom (Kuk et al., 2007).

Burnout

Burnout, as defined by a counselor named Herbert Freudenberger (1974), is to become worn out and to have exhaustion due to demands for energy and resources. Research in this area primarily began in the 1970s and started with those in the helping profession of counseling. Freudenberger (1974) noticed that this feeling existed both for him and for his colleagues, and decided it was worth studying in further detail. One concern often raised about research on burnout is that it focuses on a social construct and is challenging to test with the scientific method. Burnout is displayed in many different ways depending on the individual. This first research by Freudenberger (1974) found that a year was the typical timeframe for symptoms of burnout to occur, and described sufferers' physical appearance as always appearing to be battling a cold. While this research focused on counseling staff it has led to research in other fields. Cynicism is a frequent symptom of burnout, as it is used as a defense mechanism for attitude by those who are burned out (Maslach, 2003). This appearance of burnout

with cynical thoughts can exist in student affairs employees, yet self-care for burnout is not listed among the competencies for graduate programs.

When an individual cannot balance all the different aspects of their job it leads to a loss of energy and excitement about work (Leiter & Maslach, 2003). Such a decline can impact the student experience when student affairs professionals feel this way, yet those working in the profession are not taught how to recognize this in themselves, nor how to deal with it. “Job burnout is often the result when the relationship goes awry. It develops primarily in response to a poor fit of employees with their work and gives rise to multiple physical, mental, social, and organizational complaints and problems” (Leiter & Frame, 2014, p. 38). There are many causes of burnout but one’s workload is a major contributor. Leiter and Maslach (2003) found that it leads to a worker either leaving the position or performing the bare minimum rather than their best work. When this occurs, it is not only the employee who suffers but also the customer or student who interacts with them. Further, when workers are burned out and do not enjoy their position due to this feeling, it can wreak havoc on the community of employees (Leiter & Maslach, 2003). When one member of the team is feeling burnout, this sentiment can spread like cancer and infect other workers who were not previously burned out. With so many leaving student affairs shortly after earning their master’s degree, what impact would occur if emphasis was placed on changing employees’ perspectives and beliefs before these negative thoughts spread throughout the organization?

Impact of burnout.

Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2004) were specifically interested in studying the emotional aspects of leadership burnout that manifested in administrators

post-crisis, and how this experience influenced them as leaders. They termed this crisis experience as a *wound* and suggested that leaders should be evaluated for vulnerability, isolation, fear, and power post-experience (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). The concept of *wounding* has been studied in higher education at the community college level. Floyd et al. (2010) found that being a community college president was a stressful position that easily led to burnout from exhaustion due to the 24-hour news cycle where negative stories could quickly lead to faculty calling for votes of no-confidence. Similarly, those in entry-level positions often experience negative events in their functional area that may cause wounding, impacting their direct work in student support. These employees may not be equipped with the skills needed to use these experiences to grow as a professional. Floyd et al. (2010) suggest that presidents need to surround themselves with strong support systems in their professional and personal lives to help them weather any storm that might occur. Further research should be done to explore whether this is equally true for entry-level student affairs employees, as it has not been studied as fully among these individuals.

Leiter and Maslach (2005) imply that burnout is predictive of work behaviors and is something that should not be ignored. In studying burnout, researchers are able to analyze employees' commitment to the organization. A decision can also be made about whether training an employee for a higher level position makes sense when one can predict whether or not an employee will burn out. Leiter and Maslach (2008) continued their research with employees outside of student affairs and looked into factors predictive of burnout with the hope that by predicting it they could utilize direct intervention to prevent these employees from leaving or infecting the rest of the

community. The researchers determined that an individual's relationship with their supervisor was extremely important, and even those who were burned out were more likely to stay when they viewed their supervisor as fair in making decisions (Leiter & Maslach, 2008). This finding could suggest that in combating burnout, improving the training of supervisors may need to be emphasized instead of focusing on the individual burned-out employees. It reinforces the idea that further training in student affairs is needed once a graduate program is complete and that learning should not stop just because a degree was earned.

Burnout in Student Affairs.

Research on satisfaction in the workplace find that employees in the United States across most industries are happy with their employment, but the research on those working in student affairs is not clear with regard to employee satisfaction in the workplace (Anderson et al., 2000). Those who do not work in higher education often view life on college campuses as easy because they do not understand the work or the stressors that come with it. Individuals who decide to obtain a degree in student affairs often point to a person or situation that impacted them when they were an undergraduate as a reason for entering the field. Usually those who enter graduate school for student affairs programs immediately upon undergraduate degree completion served as a resident assistant, admissions tour guide, or member of a student activity group to gain their first pre-professional experience. Most if not all who decide that this is the career path for them have an innate desire to see students succeed and to help them develop into richer people through experiential learning. Yet guiding students on this journey can take its toll due to the personal, emotional, and high-impact issues students deal with on the entry-level employees who spend the

most time face-to-face with students. In response, employees in student affairs have turned to self-help books and other resources to combat burnout, and as a result this topic is discussed more often by those in the field (Guthrie et al., 2005).

Previous studies focus on how burnout most often occurs with individuals who work in the helping professions. It is logical that we would see this in student affairs, as the types of responsibilities assigned to many in this field mirror those in other helping professions. Chernoff (2016) used a quantitative study looking at compassion fatigue with professionals in the field of student conduct. The most common issues Chernoff (2016) discovered were depression and exhaustion resulting from secondary traumatic stress while helping others to navigate a crisis. These traumas were similar to those seen in other helping professions such as first responders, mental health providers, and the medical profession (Chernoff, 2016). Individuals in student affairs deal with cases that involve sexual and physical assault, alcohol and drug abuse, and other emotionally draining issues. These issues can take time and energy to debrief as well as to process for the employee taking it in. The most interesting finding in this study was that higher levels of burnout resulted in a corresponding increase in secondary traumatic stress, which was defined as stress that results from the knowledge and helping of a victim through a traumatic situation (Chernoff, 2016). Is there a way that graduate programs can address this before entry-level professionals experience secondary traumatic stress, and is it the stress that causes the feeling of burnout or is it a coincidence that the two appear hand-in-hand? Although this research focused specifically on student conduct officers, the work implies that those in the field can be impacted by burnout. Mullen et al. (2018) found that job stress and

burnout were predictive of job satisfaction for those working in student affairs, which mirrors other professions.

Brewer and Clippard (2002) utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory (a survey tool designed to assess levels of burnout) for individuals in higher education who work with low-income students in grant-funded positions. These positions are typically under the TRIO [not an acronym] umbrella and are interesting because even though they exist on the campus, the primary audience is high school age students. TRIO refers to eight programs that the federal government uses to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds (United States Department of Education, 2018). Although some burnout was found, contrary to other studies Brewer and Clippard (2002) found lower burnout in these professionals and higher levels of job satisfaction. It was thought that employees working in the TRIO system are more closely connected to the community that is being served and that this strong sense of connection with the community reduces the levels of emotional exhaustion (Brewer & Clippard, 2002). This finding suggests the importance of entry-level professionals connecting to the community where they are employed as a way to mitigate burnout. It may also indicate that not all workers in student affairs experience burnout and that the type of position has a direct impact on whether or not burnout is going to occur.

Job Turnover

Although studies present different numbers for how many people leave the field of student affairs, most agree that the range is 50% to 60% within their first 5 years in the profession (Frank, 2013; Herr & Strange, 1985; Marshall et al., 2016). Further, 21% left after 8 to 10 years in the field, indicating that even those who make it beyond 5 years do not always persist by staying in the field of student affairs

(Marshall et al., 2016). Those who continue working in higher education and student affairs but move up in position are considered to have persisted. In all fields, increased attrition leads to increased training costs and can impact the effectiveness of the workplace (Marshall et al., 2016). This is as true in the field of education as it is in the medical fields and other professions. Interestingly, student affairs is estimated to consist of 15% to 20% of new professionals or those with 5 or fewer years of experience (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Specific reasons for leaving the field were burnout, lack of competitive salary, work-life balance issues, limited opportunities for advancement, and a loss of passion (Marshall et al., 2016). Although not mentioned in this research, other reasons that individuals are likely to leave higher education include a change in life circumstance, new priorities, or just poor job or institutional fit. In the latter case, did the individual's passion erode over time or did they lack the grit to persevere and maintain a high level of passion for working in the field? Marshall et al. (2016) stated that their study participants did not see their supervisors as mentors, suggesting that training supervisors in how to build capacity in employees might increase longevity in the field.

John Holland suggested a theory that when personalities and work environment are compatible, they are in *congruence*, and when they are misaligned and one's personality does not match their work environment, they are more likely to change careers (Donohue, 2006). Thus, this implies that advisors to undergraduate students should have a responsibility to ensure that they are recommending the field of student affairs to the appropriate audience of future colleagues. Additionally, within the curriculum taught in some student affairs programs, a focus on the personalities

who are successful in the career and how to gain or hone these characteristics could reduce attrition in the profession.

Payment (2008) contends that there are many different definitions of millennials but some view this age group as being born between 1981 and 1995. This population contains some of those in entry-level student affairs positions. They have grown up hearing from the media and others that they will have ten careers in their life, yet they are unprepared to act like professionals and to actually know how to transition professionally between careers (Payment, 2008). This suggests that those leaving student affairs may leave due to a misunderstanding of the workplace in general and not specifically because they do not enjoy working in student affairs.

Student affairs is not unique; professionals in other fields also leave their positions after determining it is not the correct career path for them. In K-12 education, Gardner (2010) discovered that teachers in a specialized field (music) were more likely to change to teaching a different subject or to leave their positions than their peers. In analyzing why some stayed, it was discovered that those who had a high level of support from administrators were more likely to remain to teach (Gardner, 2010). Although in a different field, entry-level student affairs employees may also be more likely to stay when they are strongly supported by their administrators. Gardner (2010) found that music teachers often felt unsupported in working with special needs students or other higher needs populations, leading to workplace dissatisfaction and less interest in working with these student populations.

Across professions, job turnover exists in all. However, in other behavioral fields such as social work it is not as high as would be expected. Carmeli and

Weisberg (2006) found less turnover among social work professionals than among lawyers and financial officers due to the fact that most in this field strive to advance within their own organization. It was further theorized that this is due more to traits among those who want to stay in social work, that there are limited possibilities to find positions with other social work organizations (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). This is different from the field of student affairs where, especially in entry-level positions, there are often a plethora of openings should one be searching to change jobs. Carmeli and Weisberg (2006) discovered that like student affairs employees, those working in the legal and financial industries had many options and that further, they were more focused on individual career goals than organizational goals. This focus on the individual rather than the field may be a reason for the high rates of turnover in student affairs.

In attempting to understand burnout and career transition or change, interest is given to predictive factors which may help employers make better hires. Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen, and Nurmi (2011) found over a longitudinal study that undergraduate students who were more optimistic and engaged and who also had these factors increase while at university were less burned out in their post-graduation careers. Although this research did not look at student affairs professionals, it suggests a link to one's time in college influencing satisfaction in a given career trajectory. Perhaps living the experience strengthens learning more than being taught perseverance.

Grit

There can be many reasons that an individual would leave a profession so quickly after starting a career↓not enjoying the work, burnout, personal life factors,

or a realization that this was not the career for them. Although it would be helpful for employers and graduate programs to know why people leave, even more important is to understand the traits possessed by those who stay past 5 or 6 years. This range was chosen based on the research of Frank (2013) and Herr and Strange (1985), which found that only 40% of those in student affairs continue working in the field 5 or 6 years past earning a master's degree. Could it be that those who persist in student affairs have more grit than those who leave the profession? Duckworth et al. (2007) define *grit* as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals," further stating that "grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087-1088). This seems to sum up the skills needed by those who work in student affairs in order to progress and be successful working with students. Duckworth et al. (2007) posit that what separates leaders who are equally skilled but obtain different levels of achievement is this concept of grit. In many fields, those who are super intense are seen as leaders and innovators. Yet, grit is about stamina, much more than being flashy or intense (Duckworth, 2016). Grit could also increase in an individual as they age (Duckworth et al., 2007), suggesting that one enhances this trait through life experiences.

Duckworth et al. (2007) created a 12-question scale to measure an individual's level of grit. Further research by Duckworth and Quinn (2009) refined this tool as the Grit-S (or Short Grit Scale); they found "evidence for the predictive validity, consensual validity, and test-retest stability of the Grit-S questionnaire" (p. 172). Although Duckworth et al. (2007) did not study student affairs professionals, their research found that individuals who were higher in grit made fewer changes in their

career than their counterparts. This result was replicated and again discovered that adults who were grittier according to the scale obtained further education than their peers and made fewer career changes (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Researchers typically highlight only the overall grit score when an individual takes the Grit-S even though both perseverance and consistency are measured separately as part of the test (Crede et al., 2016). Duckworth et al. (2007) found that each factor individually showed no difference as a predictor, but became more predictive when combined together.

Beyond grit, “self-control refers to the successful resolution of a conflict between two action impulses—one that corresponds to a goal that is more valued at the moment, and another that corresponds to a goal that is of greater enduring value” (Duckworth & Gross, 2014, p. 321). Self-control complements grit but is distinct, just as while self-control focuses more on an immediate decision, grit occurs over a period of years or longer in continuing to make the decision that helps one arrive at their end goal (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Those who persist in student affairs continually make choices that keep them engaged and moving forward in the profession.

Although extensive research on grit in student affairs does not exist, studies of individuals in other occupations have found results that may be relevant to higher education. Robertson-Kraft and Duckworth (2014) found that teachers in low-income schools (K-12) who had higher grit scores at the beginning of their teaching careers received better evaluations and were less likely to leave their position mid-year. Additionally, they note that no other variables they analyzed predicted whether or not teachers were effective or persisted in their positions (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth,

2014). This study explored whether first-year student affairs employees who persisted had higher grit scores. Datu (2017) found that in a collectivist society (a society that places emphasis on the well-being of the whole group rather than individuals), those who felt connected and supported by their teachers demonstrated higher perseverance of effort and grit. Although the K-12 environment is different from higher education, there are similarities which may suggest that this research could be relatable to individuals working in student affairs as well.

Grit has been studied in relation to student success even if it has not been looked at with regard to student affairs staff. Bowman et al. (2016) found in their research that “grittier students were more satisfied with college, had a greater sense of belonging, engaged in more co-curricular activities, and even reported more interactions with faculty” (p. 644). Thus, students who exhibited gritty characteristics typically received higher grades as students during their collegiate experience. Would this hold true for employees working in student affairs as it does for their students? Additionally it was discovered that the grittier a student was, the less likely they were to change majors in college, while those who were less gritty were more likely to have changed their course of study multiple times (Bowman et al., 2016). Are those who are grittier less likely to change occupations? Meriac, Slifka, and LaBat (2015) determined that beyond grit, work ethic leads to job satisfaction in employees and a workforce that is more content overall. This connects to the idea that those who are gritter are more satisfied and content in the workplace.

In reviewing studies on race and grit, Soutter and Seider (2013) state that African American students at institutions that are primarily Caucasian needed to feel a

sense of belonging to succeed, and those who did so also exhibited increased levels of grit. It is unclear if these students were grittier due to this overall experience or if they came to college already grittier than their peers. Bowman et al. (2016) were unable to find any conclusive differences in relation to race and grit in their study. Further studies on the impact of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and other variables on grit are important to determine if these characteristics are significant factors (Bowman et al., 2016).

One of the intriguing aspects of gritty individuals is that they can continue on a path to success without constant feedback from supervisors, moving forward to meet organizational goals even if they are not receiving confirmation that they are moving in the right direction (Duckworth et al. 2007; Duckworth, 2016). Vainio and Daukantaite (2016) found that grit is related to all aspects of well-being as a motivating factor. What all of these studies suggest is that one can be motivated to achieve their aims merely by being gritty. Additionally, it is suggested that “given that grit is a future-orientated motivation, it might induce a sense of hope, which in turn might make individuals feel a sense of meaning in their lives” (Vainio & Daukantaite, 2016, p. 2141). This hope may be what allows individuals to persevere even through challenging times, allowing those working in student affairs to keep focused even if there is despair around them.

Although grit has been studied in an academic setting, some limitations with the construct have occurred. Grit seems to help students move along better with long-term goals but is not as useful for short-term achievements or goals (Wolters & Hussain, 2015). In other words, grit may not impact who will receive a higher grade

on an individual paper, but may show up more in who will receive a higher grade for the class. This finding indicates that an attempt by a specific professor to make a student grittier for one course in college is unlikely to have an impact (Wolters & Hussain, 2015). Another limitation of grit mentioned by Wolters and Hussain (2015) is that no study conducted has shown how students prioritize their long-term goals and select which one is most important. For example, should they prioritize completing their major or finding post-college employment, or are these interwoven with each other? Maddi et al. (2012) found that hardiness was more of a predictor of retention for cadets at the United State Military Academy (USMA) than grit. However, grit was still a positive factor in overall retention (Maddi et al., 2012). Although the USMA is quite a different environment from many colleges and universities, the idea of grit being a retention predictor for students could be further extrapolated in retaining quality staff to support our students. The two populations are different, yet those who enter student affairs often do so based on a positive experience they had during their undergraduate collegiate experience; these same factors could lead to persisting as an employee or leaving the field altogether.

Summary

Those who choose to be employed in the profession of student affairs often do so as a result of a transformational experience they had out of the classroom during their own time at college. The research reviewed suggests there is no standard or universal curriculum for student affairs programs (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Gansemer-Topf et al, 2006; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Walple, 2006). Although professional organizations have identified competencies, these are not required to be met by graduate programs. Further, are graduate programs the best manner to teach

professionals this career or could there be a better path? There is no requirement for further training of individuals in student affairs after the completion of a master's degree to keep them current in the field; should this avenue be explored? With so many leaving student affairs shortly after earning their master's degree, what impact would be seen if emphasis was placed on defeating this negativity before it spread throughout the organization?

Burnout may be one of the constructs that lead individuals to leave the profession. Those who reach this level may not be as engaged with their colleagues or students. Yet even some who are burned out early in their professional journey persist to long and successful careers. Is this a result of the idea of grit? Can this conceptual framework be utilized as a predictor of who will persist and who will not? If so, how to become grittier should be taught in graduate school to better prepare those who chose to enter the field of student affairs.

Chapter 3: Methodology

College students spend their time both inside and outside of the classroom. Out-of-the classroom activities allow students to get involved in co-curricular experiences. Some students spend this time working while others use it to be involved in activities, athletics, and other events on their campus. As students have these experiences outside of academics, individuals who are practitioners in student affairs often guide them in this non-academic aspect of their collegiate journey. Taub and McEwen (2006) found that those who entered the profession of student affairs were sometimes active as members of student organizations while undergraduates; some had an innate desire to work with college students, and others entered the field by accident or chance. This study was interested in those who entered student affairs or have remained in the field and earned a master's degree in a program directly related to higher education, student affairs, college student personnel, or a related course of study. Student affairs professionals often work in departments across a variety of functional areas such as residential life, student conduct, Greek life, student leadership, multicultural student support, athletics, admissions, and student activities. The purpose of this study was to determine if an individual's level of grit can serve as a factor of persistence in master's prepared student affairs professionals in the higher education profession.

Research suggests that student affairs has a high rate of turnover among individuals leaving the profession (Frank, 2013; Herr & Strange, 1985), yet it is unclear what specific characteristic, if any, impacts an individual's persistence in the profession. By determining which traits help practitioners to remain in the field,

supervisors would be better able to support entry-level employees and help them to hone this trait.

Research Design

To address the research problem, members of ACPA College Student Educators International (<https://www.myacpa.org/>) were surveyed via electronic distribution and collection using Qualtrics. This survey consisted of the Grit-S as well as basic demographic information. For this study, data was collected from members of a professional organization. The group selected was ACPA, as it is one of the leading professional organizations for student affairs professionals from all different types of offices, departments, and backgrounds within the field. One of the core values of ACPA is “continuous professional development and personal growth of student affairs and student services professionals that includes the development of effective administrative leadership and management skills” (ACPA, “Mission, Vision, and Values,” 2021) which connects directly with the goals of this research.

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher applied through ACPA to distribute the survey. Once approval to conduct research was obtained from ACPA, surveys were distributed to master’s prepared student affairs employees who were self-declared new or mid-level professionals. Surveys are an appropriate means of data collection because they gather information from a broad range of subjects about how people behave and act (Fink, 2003). The survey consisted primarily of the Grit Scale (Duckworth et al., 2007) and included supplemental demographic questions by the researcher to facilitate addressing the research questions.

Research Questions

There are two questions that guided this research:

- 1) What impact does grit play in the persistence of master's prepared student affairs employees in the profession?
- 2) Is grit a predictor of longevity in master's prepared professionals working in student affairs?

Population and Sample

It is estimated that 180,100 individuals work in the field of student affairs (United States Department of Labor, 2018); however, the membership numbers of ACPA College Educators International are approximately 7,500 (ACPA, "Who We Are," 2021). As part of the application process to have ACPA distribute the survey, the researcher had to designate the target population to sample. The survey was distributed to 268 entry- and mid-level professionals in the New England region by ACPA on Wednesday, December 4, 2019, with a reminder sent on Tuesday, December 17, 2019. Additional outreach was performed via Facebook and through sharing by professional colleagues in an attempt to expand the audience of entry- and mid-level professionals who would have an opportunity to complete the survey.

The target population was those who have earned a master's degree in student affairs, higher education administration, or comparable degree and have self-declared themselves to be new or mid-level practitioners. Those who have earned a master's degree were the desired respondents, as those who earned this degree have made an active choice to pursue a career in student affairs. Those without a master's degree in higher education in student affairs were excluded from the study. The determination to include only those with a master's degree in this research was made because it is the

foundation of this research, and those who have earned a master's degree were the targeted population. Obtaining a master's degree alone can set one on a career path, but additional skill building is required for acquisition of practical skills, training, and talent in order for one to stay on the path defined by the degree (Oriol, Brannagan, Ferguson, & Pearce, 2015). This suggests that the effort behind obtaining a master's degree in an area might provide a strong indication that the individual plans to pursue this career path, but it is not definitive by itself (Oriol et al., 2015). Professionals who have earned advanced degrees beyond a master's degree were included if they met the definition of master's prepared student affairs professional.

Within ACPA, the specific geographic region targeted for this survey were states included within the New England College Personnel Association. These states are Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont. The total membership numbers for this region are not publicly available, but the survey was distributed to 268 individuals who met these demographics according to ACPA. The New England region has over 250 colleges and universities serving nearly 800,000 enrolled undergraduates (New England Board of Higher Education, 2020). Focusing on this region that is rich in colleges and universities provided data that was reviewed and analyzed to make conclusions about student affairs practitioners in the New England region.

Instrumentation

A link to the survey with instructions was distributed by email to the target population through ACPA. Links to the survey were also posted in higher education and student affairs groups on Facebook and re-posted by fellow colleagues who work in the field of student affairs. The link takes participants to a survey hosted through

Qualtrics, software that was used to collect and securely store survey responses. A copy of this survey can be found in full in Appendix B and begins with 13 basic demographic questions followed by the eight-question short grit scale (Duckworth, 2019). The Grit-S score table is located in Appendix C (Duckworth, 2019). The Grit-S was selected after reviewing research by Duckworth and Quinn (2009) that confirmed the predictive reliability and consensual validity of the Grit-S test (p. 172). The added demographic information was used for analyzing the data to determine if any significant relationships emerged from the demographic characteristics.

Data Collection

Participants were sent a series of questions related to their gender identity, ethnicity, and career. Participants also responded to the Grit-S scale. The questions were put into Qualtrics as the primary survey tool. Additional questions created for this research (such as functional area in student affairs and future plans in student affairs) were added to the survey for participants to respond to. Participants were sent a link to the survey to complete in Qualtrics either on a computer or on a mobile device. Most respondents completed the survey in less than 10 minutes. All data was collected and initially stored using Qualtrics.

Confidentiality

Survey data was collected anonymously in Qualtrics. Although the Qualtrics survey's URL was distributed by ACPA, only the researcher had access to the participants' responses. The data was reviewed on the researcher's computers; these computers were password protected. As the data was not connected to personally identifying participant information, coding to protect identities was not needed. Only the researcher had access to the data. Every effort was made to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Qualtrics was used to administer and collect the survey data. The data was downloaded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and participants' grit scores were calculated. Data in text form (i.e., M = male, F = female) was converted to numeric values to facilitate analysis. For each of the 8 questions of the Grit-S scale, the answer selected by the participant was converted to a numeric value as listed in Appendix C. Grit scores were calculated using Microsoft Excel.

Formatted data was imported from SPSS for statistical analysis. Data were analyzed for significance of difference by using Independent Sample t-tests. Independent Sample t-tests are a method of comparing the means of two distinct groups when a researcher is trying to determine whether or not the means are significantly different. In each t-test, the subject's Grit-S score was the dependent variable; comparison was based on grouping variables. These grouping variables were: "gender," "ethnicity: are you of Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin," "how would you describe yourself (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, or write in," "plans to remain in the field," "years of experience," "future degree plans," "years they plan to remain in student affairs," "type of institution they work at, size of institution they work at," "state their institution is located in," "first functional area after earning a master's degree," and "current functional area."

The results of the t-tests were captured in Microsoft Word for later review. For questions with low participant numbers different groupings were attempted to increase the total number within a group in order to reveal or discover relationships among the independent variables.

Summary

Considerable research has focused upon why employees leave the field of student affairs (Brewer & Clippard, 2002; Frank, 2013; Tull, 2006). Determining why people stay in the field will enrich the field by providing key indicators that supervisors can nurture and train in order to keep their workforce longer. Grit as measured by grit scores may be the factor that determines the likelihood of an employee lasting 6 years or more. A survey was constructed and sent to student affairs practitioners and was available for completion over a 2-month time frame. The survey responses were analyzed for significant differences among variables. The analysis examined whether grit (as measured by calculating individual grit scores) is a factor of longevity, and what if any general influence it has on the profession of student affairs.

Chapter 4: Results

There were 92 participants who both completed the survey and met the criteria of the research. Twenty-six additional respondents started but did not finish the survey. One respondent who completed the survey did not fulfill the criteria of a master's level student affairs professional; their responses were not used for analysis or reporting. The participants self-identified as 68 females, 22 males, and 2 non-binary individuals. Respondents identified themselves as 88% White; 6.5% Asian; 6.5% Black or African American; 3% Hispanic, Latino or of Spanish origin; 1% Alaska Native; and 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (participants could select multiple identities). Responses to the Grit-S questionnaire were tabulated, and grit scores were calculated using Microsoft Excel. A grit scoring key (Appendix C) was used to arrive at individual grit scores from the survey responses. Those who did not complete the survey all stopped on the question that asked what state they currently worked in. Possibly respondents did not get beyond this question because there was not an option for "other" and they did not feel that any of the given responses was appropriate for their individual situation. With regard to educational achievements, one participant had earned a bachelor's degree and this participant's responses were discarded; 81 had earned a master's degree and 11 had earned a doctorate or Juris doctor.

All data was imported into Excel and text data (such as name of states) was converted into numerical datasets to be analyzed in SPSS with Independent Sample t-tests. Independent Sample t-tests were utilized as they are a method of comparing the means of two separate groups when a researcher is trying to determine whether or not the means are significantly different. The data was analyzed to determine if any significant differences existed. In each t-test, the subject's Grit-S score was the test

variable and the various comparisons were the grouping variables. The alpha chosen to determine if significant differences existed was .05, which was selected to reduce the probability of a type 1 error (Aron & Aron, 2003). With an alpha of .05, 95% of the time if significant difference is found it is due to a true relationship; 5% of the time it occurred due to who was sampled rather than a true relationship within the population (Aron & Aron, 2003). This type of analysis is used for data that follows a normal curve (Aron & Aron, 2003). Based on the variables and the data collected, t-tests were the appropriate analysis to run for this research which is the reason it was the type of analysis selected.

There was significant difference between the grit scores for respondents who plan to stay in the field of student affairs and higher education ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .38$) and for those who are unsure of their future plans ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .49$), conditions; $t(83) = 2.74$, $p = .007$. These results show that those who appear to be more certain of their plans to remain in the field have a higher grit score than those who do not yet know their future plans. After conducting a t-test analysis, no significant difference was found between the variables “are planning to remain in the field” compared to those who “plan to leave the field.” Basic data statistics for the future plans variable are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Future Plans of Participants

Plan	n	Mean Grit Score	Standard Deviation
Stay in Field	47	3.93	.38
Leave Field	7	3.61	.76
Unsure of plans	38	3.67	.49
Total:	92		

Respondents were asked to indicate their gender and self-identified as female, male, and non-binary. There were significant differences between grit scores for females ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .44$) and males ($M = 3.59$, $SD = .51$), conditions; $t(89) = 2.73$, $p = .008$. This finding shows that females had significantly higher grit scores than their male counterparts. The number of participants who self-identified as non-binary was too small to be analyzed significantly. Basic data statistics for the gender variable are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Gender of Participants

Gender	n	Mean Grit Score	Standard Deviation
Female	68	3.88	.44
Male	22	3.59	.51
Non-binary	2	3.81	.27
Total:	92		

Independent t-tests were completed to compare years of experience in the field in order to determine whether any significant differences existed among individuals' grit scores as a result of their years of experience. No significant difference among grit scores was found.

Respondents were asked to select an identity that best described them and also had the option to select multiple identities. The options were: American Indian or Alaska Native (n = 1); Asian (n = 6); Black or African American (n = 6); Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin (n = 3); Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (n = 1); White (n = 81), or write-in (n = 0). After conducting a t-test analysis, no significant difference among grit scores was found.

Respondents were asked if they planned to complete another degree in student affairs and were given five options to choose from. These options were: I have not made a decision as of this point (n = 34); no, I do not plan to obtain any further educational degrees (n = 19); no, I plan to obtain another degree in another field (n = 5); or yes, I plan to obtain a Ph.D. or Ed.D. (n = 34). After conducting a t-test analysis, no significant difference among grit scores was found.

Respondents were asked how many years they planned to remain working in student affairs and were provided six options to choose from. These options were 1 year (n = 5), 2 years (n = 4), 3 years (n = 4), 4 years (n = 1), 5 years (n = 5), and 6 years or more (n = 73). There was a significant difference in the grit scores for those planning to stay in the field 2 years (M = 3.91, SD = .33) and those planning to stay 5 years (M = 3.10, SD = .57), conditions; $t(7) = 2.50$, $p .041$. This finding shows that those planning to be in the field for 2 more years had a higher grit score than those who planned to remain for 5. However, the sample size was 4 for those planning to stay 2 years and the sample size was 5 for those planning to stay 5 years. Although this still shows a significant difference, these sample sizes increase the chance that a sampling error exists. Sampling error occurs when there are not enough participants in

the sample, which prevents the sample from fully representing the research population (Aron & Aron, 2003). There was a significant difference between the grit scores for those planning to remain 5 years ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .57$) and those planning to remain 6 years ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .44$), conditions; $t(76) = -3.55$, $p = .001$. This finding shows that those planning to remain 6 years had a higher grit score than those planning to remain 5, but again these results may include a sampling error. Respondents' grit scores for those planning to remain 1 to 5 years was run as a total group against those planning to stay 6 years or more, and no significant differences among grit scores were found after conducting a t-test analysis. Basic data statistics for the number of years planning to remain in student affairs variable are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Years to Remain in Student Affairs

Years	n	Mean Grit Score	Standard Deviation
1	5	3.70	.68
2	4	3.91	.33
3	4	3.81	.33
4	1	NA	NA
5	5	3.10	.57
6 or more	73	3.83	.44
Total:	92		

To look at what type of institution the respondents worked at, the participants were given the following options: public 4-year ($n = 33$), private 4-year ($n = 54$), public 2-year ($n = 4$), private 2-year ($n = 0$), and other ($n = 1$). After conducting a t-test analysis, no significant differences among grit scores were found based on the type of institution where respondents worked.

To look at the size of the institution, participants were provided with three options: 5,000 or less ($n = 46$), 5,001 to 15,000 ($n = 35$), and 15,001 or more ($n = 11$). After conducting a t-test analysis, no significant differences among grit scores were found based on the size of the institution where respondents were employed.

Respondents were specifically selected from in the New England region of the United States. State response rates were as follows: Connecticut ($n = 14$), Maine ($n = 7$), Massachusetts ($n = 50$), New Hampshire ($n = 11$), New York ($n = 4$), Rhode Island ($n = 3$), and Vermont ($n = 2$); one participant did not identify their state. There was a significant difference between the grit scores for participants from Connecticut ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .41$) and Maine ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .54$), conditions; $t(19) = 2.16$, $p = .044$. This finding shows that student affairs practitioners from Maine had lower grit scores than those from Connecticut. Respondents from Maine were a small sample size, which should be taken into consideration when reviewing this significance because the chance of sampling error is greater. Significant difference is still seen but sampling error occurs when there are not enough participants in the sample, which prevents the sample from fully representing the research population (Aron & Aron, 2003). There was a significant difference between the grit scores for participants from New Hampshire ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .34$) and Maine ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .54$), conditions; $t(16) = 2.48$, $p = .025$. Similar to Connecticut, New Hampshire student affairs professionals had higher grit scores than those from Maine. However, the sample size from Maine was small, meaning that a sampling error could occur with this significant difference. After conducting a t-test analysis, no other significant differences between these

sample populations were found. Basic data statistics for the states in which respondents work variable are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

States of Institution of Participants

State	n	Mean Grit Score	Standard Deviation
Connecticut	14	3.88	.41
Maine	7	3.43	.54
Massachusetts	50	3.77	.43
New Hampshire	11	3.94	.34
New York	4	3.97	.79
Rhode Island	3	3.58	1.13
Vermont	2	3.94	.44
Other	1	NA	NA
Total	92		

Participants came from different types of institutions ranging from those where all students living on campus in residence halls to those where only a few or no students live on campus. The different types of campuses were highly residential, with 50% of students living on campus (n = 45); primarily residential, with 25% to 49% living on campus (n = 34); and primarily non-residential, with fewer than 25% living on campus (n = 13). After conducting a t-test analysis, no significant differences among grit scores were seen depending on type of institutions.

Participants were asked to identify the functional field for their first post-master's position in student affairs and were able to select from multiple responses. The options that were available for respondents to select were as follows: Academic Advising (n = 11), Admissions (n = 4), Career Advising (n=4), Greek Life (n = 1), Orientation (n = 4), Recreational Sports (n = 1), Residential Life and Housing Services (n = 52), Student Activities (n = 14), Student Conduct and Community Standards (n =

9), and Student Leadership (n = 2). A write-in option for Other (n=16) was also available for respondents who felt that none of the responses provided best described their first post-master's position in student affairs. Those who selected this response identified Disability Services (n = 3), Health Center (n = 3), Multicultural Student Affairs (n = 1), General Student Affairs (n = 1), and Policy and Planning (n = 1); the rest did not select an answer. After conducting a t-test analysis, no significant difference was found among grit scores depending on the respondent's first functional area, including in attempts to combine related functional areas to increase the n.

Participants were asked about the functional area of their current position and were able to select from multiple responses. The available options were as follows: Academic Advising (n = 15), Admissions (n = 2), Career Advising (n = 4), Greek Life (n=1), Orientation (n=2), Residential Life and Housing Services (n = 28), Student Activities (n =8), Student Conduct and Community Standards (n = 5), and Title IX (n = 5). A write-in option for Other (n = 20) was also available and was identified as follows: Disability Services (n = 1), Dean of Students/Senior Student Affairs Leadership (n = 4), Faculty (n = 1), Pre-College Program (n = 1), and Student Affairs Generalist (n = 2); the rest did not fill in an answer. After conducting a t-test analysis, no significant differences were found among grit scores depending on the respondent's current functional area, including in attempts to combine related functional areas to increase the n.

Summary

The data for 92 participants who completed the survey and met the criteria for this research was used for analysis within this study. These participants were from the New England region and had earned a master's degree in student affairs or another

related discipline. Independent Sample t-tests were used to compare the means of different groups in reviewing for significant differences. Respondents who plan to remain in the field of student affairs had significantly higher grit scores than those who did not yet know their plans. Participants who self-identified as females had significantly higher grit scores than those participants who self-identified as males. Respondents who planned to stay in the field 2 years and 6 years both had significantly higher grit scores than those planning to stay for 5 years. Significant differences were also found between grit scores for participants from Connecticut and New Hampshire (higher scores) than those from Maine, although the small sample size from Maine increases the chance of a sampling error with these findings. What these results suggest is explored in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Synthesis

The purpose of this study was to determine if an individual's level of grit can serve as a factor of persistence in master's prepared student affairs professionals in the higher education profession. Previous research observed a trend among individuals earning master's degrees in higher education administration and related fields working in their positions for a few years, but then leaving the field completely within a few years. These studies suggest that only 40% of those working in student affairs reach their fifth and/or sixth year of employment after earning a master's degree in the field (Frank, 2013; Herr & Strange, 1985). It is not clear what type of employment is sought by those who leave student affairs, but this could be an area for further exploration. In a field where entry-level employees are expected to earn a master's degree, this degree of turnover is concerning. As such the following research questions were posited:

- 1) What impact does grit play in the persistence of master's prepared student affairs employees in the profession?
- 2) Is grit a predictor of longevity in master's prepared professionals working in student affairs?

In answer to question 1, this research found that student affairs employees who self-identified as female had significantly higher grit scores than their male counterparts, suggesting that they had more passion for and perseverance in the profession. It is unclear if these higher scores reflected an innate characteristic of females or external events that occurred in their lives and their work. The state in which an individual's institution was located also showed significance despite the

study's small sample size. Individuals from both New Hampshire and Connecticut had significantly higher grit scores than those from Maine. This indicates that the state in which an individual's institution is located is a factor in longevity in the profession.

In answer to question 2, the results showed that individuals who planned to remain in the field of student affairs had significantly higher grit scores than those who did not know what their plans were and were undecided about whether they would stay in the field or leave it. Although this study did not seek to create a prediction tool or model, this finding may indicate that individuals who plan to spend a career in student affairs are more likely to have longevity in the profession. Additionally, significantly lower grit scores were seen among those who planned to stay in the profession for 5 years compared to those who planned to remain in student affairs for 6 or more years. This finding supports the idea that individuals who plan to remain in the field for a longer period of time are grittier.

Summary of Findings

The findings suggest that grit has impact on student affairs employees and that those who have long-term plans within the field have higher grit scores. Significantly higher grit scores were found among master's prepared student affairs professionals who planned to remain in the field compared to master's prepared student affairs professionals who were unsure if they would remain in higher education. This could suggest that individuals with higher grit scores are more concrete in their long-term planning since they seemed to be clearer in their plans to stay. Grit may be an important consideration when institutions are looking to hire professionals whom they hope will stay for longer than 6 years in student affairs.

Analysis of the responses of the survey participants did not find a significant difference between individuals who indicated that they planned to leave the field and professionals who indicated they planned to stay. While respondents who were definitive in their plans to remain in the field had higher grit scores than individuals who were unsure, this was not seen among practitioners who were definitive in their plans to leave the field. It stands out that this difference existed only between individuals who planned to remain in the field and respondents who were unsure of their plans. It did not exist between individuals who were planning to leave the field. This is an area that would be interesting to research and explore further.

Perhaps higher grit scores are found among individuals who know decisively that they want to stay in the field of student affairs. These findings are in line with findings by Duckworth et al. (2007), that individuals who had more grit made fewer changes in their career than those with lower grit scores. While Duckworth et al. (2007) explored actual changes in individuals' careers, this study investigated planned changes; however, these results support the findings of the previous research. The results are important because they indicate that building confidence and desire for long-term careers may increase retention of professionals in the field of student affairs, as those who know they want to stay have higher grit scores. This resonates with findings by Hochanadel and Finamore (2015), who stated that when individuals are taught how to persist they develop a growth mindset that increases their grit and helps them succeed. Although in their review of research Hochanadel and Finamore (2015) did not expand on how to teach students to persist, they suggest that those who are successful at this internalize a growth mindset around persistence.

It would be logical to surmise that those who are less gritty would not be as clear in their future plans based on this study and on previous work by Duckworth et al. (2007). Interestingly, Duckworth and Quinn (2009) found that those who had higher grit scores had obtained additional education compared to those with lower grit scores, while this study did not see a significant difference among grit scores for those who planned to obtain another degree and those who did not. Duckworth et al. (2007) found that those with graduate degrees had higher levels of grit than those with bachelor's degrees, which suggests that participants in this research had higher grit scores overall because they earned a master's degree. Duckworth (2016) suggests that grit can help all students succeed academically. However, in their review of multiple studies on grit Fosnacht, Copridge, and Sarraf (2019) state that it is not a predictor of academic success. This could suggest that higher grit scores are a by-product of earning a further degree, and not an intrinsic motivator to obtain one.

Participants who selected female as their gender identity had higher grit scores than those identified as male. Among chief student affairs officer positions (the position in student affairs that holds the highest rank at an institution), 51% of respondents to a survey were male while 49% were female (Wesaw & Sponsler, 2014). With females having more grit, the number of females persisting in the profession to lead student affairs departments may increase over the next decade. Future research could explore how more women are advancing to leadership roles, and whether it is because they have more grit or enter their positions with more grit. Does more attention need to be focused on males and increasing their grit? Or does focusing on this gender disparity in student affairs even matter?

A statistically significant difference was seen between those individuals who plan to stay in student affairs for 2 years (higher grit scores) versus those who plan to stay for 5 years. Grit scores for participants planning to stay in the field for 5 years (lower scores) compared to those planning to remain for 6 years or more also showed a statistically significant difference. The sample sizes for those planning to remain for 2 years and those planning to stay for 5 years were small, so it is possible that a sampling error influenced these results. However, significance was still found and these findings are consistent with findings from the previous questions (that those who have a decisive plan to continue working in the field have a higher grit score). Individuals who see themselves as long-term practitioners may have higher self-confidence in their ability to weather professional hardships and thus are grittier. Again, this importance of having a desire to stay in the field occurs when participants had higher grit scores. By improving employees' grit, institutions may find themselves with more employees who desire to stay in student affairs and who see a future in it, and fewer who plan to leave the profession. The next area to explore is how employers and institutions can build programs and training to raise employee grit scores.

This study focused on participants working in student affairs and related fields in the New England region. Results were analyzed to see if individuals from different states had significantly different grit scores. Both Connecticut and New Hampshire participants had significantly different grit scores than those from Maine, and in both cases the mean grit score was higher in these states compared to Maine. The sample from Maine is subject to the potential of sampling error; however, significant differences were found. If these findings were replicated in a larger sample, could this

indicate that those in Maine are less likely to persist? This may lead to impacts on higher education in Maine if student affairs professionals are not in these positions for the long term. The question is important because practitioners working in student affairs in Maine may be having different experiences that cause them to be less gritty, or it could be that they are coming to Maine less prepared than individuals working in other New England states. What is unique about Maine that those working in student affairs in this state are less gritty than their colleagues from other New England states?

Having a high grit score indicates that one has “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). This is borne out by the research conducted in this study, as those who saw themselves staying in the field had higher grit scores. A higher level of grit indicates that these individuals have long-term goals to work in student affairs, suggesting that grit and longevity are connected. Grit increases somewhat as one ages due to the natural adversity that one experiences (Duckworth et al., 2007). However, by hiring employees who have higher grit scores or by increasing the grit of current team members, leaders in student affairs should see an increase in longevity among their employees.

Implications for Practice

Duckworth et al. (2007) posit that what separates leaders who are equally skilled but obtain different levels of achievement is this concept of grit. At the same time, grit is about stamina rather than being a flashy leader (Duckworth, 2016). Gaining education, overcoming adversity, and pushing forward may help individuals to increase their perseverance, while remembering why they entered a field in the first place helps them to center their passion for their career. To best train employees, institutions should have managers who are able to help their team navigate through

adversity, and able to respond to any problem that might occur. This may develop through naturally occurring events or through training programs. Beyond enjoying the work that individuals might perform in student affairs, many individuals desire supervisors who care about them and support them in order to persist. The relationship that an employee has with the institution and their supervisor may be essential to their persisting in the profession. The added benefit of this situation is that it might increase the passion an individual has for their work, as they are excited to be in a caring environment that supports them as an individual.

The relationship between individuals and their identified gender is important for the field of student affairs. The higher level of grit seen in this research for participants who identified as female could indicate that females will stay in the field longer, perhaps increasing the number of individuals planning to stay for more than 5 years. This may increase the number of women in student affairs leadership roles on college campuses. These findings do not suggest that males should not be hired for roles in the field, but perhaps male-identifying individuals have a need to become grittier.

With significant differences being found (higher grit scores) among individuals who plan to stay in the student affairs field and those who plan to stay 6 years or more, employers could focus on helping new employees to see future career paths as they set individual long-term goals. Supporting this idea, Crede et al. (2016) discovered that grit can be a reliable indicator to use in fields with retention issues (compared to fields that do not have this issue), as it may help others to identify individuals with low grit scores who need intervention in order to retain them in their roles. If entry-level

employees see a future in the job it might create more of a desire to keep working in student affairs. Also, further research could indicate methods and trainings to work with employees to increase their grit, which may help them see themselves long-term in the field.

Duckworth et al. (2007) found that grit can increase as individuals age, which would suggest that as they stay in the field of student affairs, their grit will increase. While passion for one's work is typically a more innate feeling rather than a skill, perseverance may increase as individuals overcome hardships and adversity (Duckworth, 2016). Each individual overcomes obstacles and adversity differently depending on what their career or personal experience throws at them. Grit does not appear to be a trait that can be taught via PowerPoint presentations, but time and experience appear to be the methods by which one can increase their grit if it is low (Duckworth, 2016).

Analysis indicated that individuals from Maine working in student affairs had less grit than their counterparts in Connecticut and New Hampshire. If this data were to remain consistent with further research, managers and higher education leadership would want to create training and programs to increase the grit of student affairs employees in Maine. Increasing grit would solidify individuals' connections to the field and help prevent them from leaving student affairs quickly just a few years after starting their career.

Limitations

The quantity of data in the study was limited by the number of survey respondents. Many more individuals were invited to participate than chose to do so. Perhaps the act of completing a survey impacts an individual's grit score, or those who

are more interested in advancing the field may have more interest in participating in research that meets that end; however, the current research cannot answer this question. Looking at the data for those who started the survey but did not complete it shows that the latter ended their progress on the question that asked in what state their institution is located. This suggests that these participants did not work at a New England institution. As there was no option for *not listed* for those not working in the New England region, this survey missed data that could have been useful to analyze. Further, because the research focused on individuals working in the student affairs profession in New England the study may not be generalizable for the rest of the United States and internationally. Some sample sizes were small, increasing the risk of sampling error. Further research should replicate this survey in an effort to obtain larger samples and to determine if similar significant differences exist. An additional limitation was that 88% of the respondents were White. Therefore, this research may not be generalizable to more diverse student affairs professionals.

Recommendations for Further Research

A significant difference was found in higher grit scores for individuals who planned to stay working in student affairs compared to those who were not certain what their plans were for working in the field. Further research should be conducted across a wide variety of fields to see if this holds true or if it is unique to student affairs. Is this common in other occupations where those who are planning a long-term future in their occupation have higher grit scores or is it unique to student affairs practitioners? If it is unique, it could suggest that those who are grittier are more suited for this field. However, if this significance is seen for individuals on career paths outside of student affairs, it suggests that people who are more certain about their

career plans are more likely to be grittier. This may very well be the case, as it would make sense that those who are less gritty would not be as clear about what they want to do with their futures. As there was no significant difference between those who have decided to leave student affairs and those who have decided to stay, further research should explore whether those who are decisive about their career plans have higher grit scores than those who are unsure about their career future. This could be an aspect of grit that was unexplored in this current research. Further research could also seek to determine grit scores of former student affairs officials who actually did depart the profession, as they were not surveyed as part of this research.

Because gender showed a significance for higher grit scores, further research should be conducted to explore the lived experiences of females and males who choose to work in student affairs. Do pre-employment conditions impact grit scores or did this occur in a master's degree program or in the workplace? Future studies should look further into why females have higher grit scores than males. Do females have more grit because they are female or is this unique to the field of student affairs? How do institutions and leaders in student affairs work specifically to increase grit among their male employees within the context of student affairs employment? Additionally, non-binary individuals should be studied further in relation to grit, as the sample size in this research was too small to draw conclusions.

This study asked participants how many years they planned to remain working in student affairs. The highest option was 6 or more years, which also was selected by more survey participants than any other option. If this research were to be replicated, the questionnaire should ask about more than 6 years to see if some other number best

determines an individual's interest in staying in student affairs. Is it also a fair question to ask individuals how many years out they plan to remain in their current profession? Could further research be conducted to indicate how far out individuals might formulate their future career plans?

If further research were done comparing participants from New England states, the sample size from Maine should be increased. It was intriguing that the grit scores from Maine were significantly different from Connecticut and New Hampshire scores because this was not seen for any other state. Therefore further research to determine if this is true for a larger sample should be completed. What is it about professionals in Maine that caused them to have lower grit scores? Or was this just a random occurrence in the research? Follow-up on this finding would be important before making too many generalizations about this population.

As it has been shown that higher grit scores lead to persistence in the field of student affairs, it is imperative that institutions and leaders find ways to increase the grit of their employees. Research should be conducted to discover the best methods to accomplish this goal. Is training the best way to increase grit on a team, or are there other methods that are more effective? Further, do high level managers need to increase their own grit in order to impact the grit of their employees in student affairs or should their focus only be on increasing the grit of those they supervise? Discovering the best methods to increase grit in student affairs employees would lead to more persistence in the field of student affairs, and perhaps less burnout.

In some research on grit, the individual who participates in the scale receives their grit score. The higher the score, the greater the participant's level of grit. As this

research is continued, I recommend incorporating giving the participant their grit score into the survey tool. Then a researcher could follow up with participants in a qualitative manner to see how an individual reflects on the score they received. The questions asked of participants through qualitative research methods might explain the findings of the current research in more depth.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine if an individual's level of grit can serve as a factor of persistence in master's prepared student affairs professionals in the higher education profession. Individuals working in the student affairs profession who stated that they were going to remain in the field had significantly higher grit scores than individuals who were undecided. This suggests that grit may serve as a factor of persistence in student affairs professionals. In hiring student affairs employees, it could be that managers should focus on individuals who are decisive and know what they want to do with their careers rather than individuals who do not know if they plan to stay in the occupation. Another question to consider is whether entry-level employees truly know what their long-term career plans are, or if it is asking too much to expect them to think too far ahead at this stage in their profession.

Females in this study showed higher levels of grit than their male counterparts, perhaps suggesting that female participants display more passion and perseverance in their professional and personal lives. This does not mean that we should only hire females into student affairs positions, but it does suggest that women who choose to work in student affairs may have innate skills that result in higher levels of grit. It is also imperative that managers work to increase the grit of their male employees so that

they can persevere in the field. The way to achieve this specifically in the context of student affairs would need to be further researched and explored.

The research conducted here showed that participants working in student affairs who were employed in Maine have lower grit scores than participants in New Hampshire and Connecticut. Determining whether this can be replicated and, if so, why it may be important for leaders who hire professionals to work in student affairs in Maine. Do these student affairs professionals who move to Maine have other backgrounds or experiences that result in their receiving lower grit scores than individuals in Connecticut and New Hampshire and, if so, what is it that makes them different?

The purpose of this study was to determine if an individual's level of grit can serve as a factor of persistence in master's prepared student affairs professionals in the higher education profession. This research showed that an individual's level of grit can serve as a factor of persistence in master's prepared student affairs professionals in the higher education profession. The result of this research suggests that participants who are grittier have stronger plans to stay in the field, suggesting that they will persevere in the face of obstacles that they encounter (as shown in research by Duckworth et al., 2007) and will move forward with passion in their work (Duckworth et al., 2007). It is likely that student affairs professionals with higher levels of grit are the individuals we want dealing with our students, as these individuals encountered their own obstacles and from these experiences developed their perseverance and passion.

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Appendices

Appendix A*Competencies for Those Working in Student Affairs*

(ACPA College Student Educators International & NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015, pp. 12-15)

Competency Area	Description
Personal and Ethical Foundations (PEF)	Involves the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to develop and maintain integrity in one's life and work; this includes thoughtful development, critique, and adherence to a holistic and comprehensive standard of ethics and commitment to one's own wellness and growth. Personal and ethical foundations are aligned because integrity has an internal locus informed by a combination of external ethical guidelines, an internal voice of care, and our own lived experiences. Our personal and ethical foundations grow through a process of curiosity, reflection, and self-authorship.
Values, Philosophy, and History (VPH)	Involves knowledge, skills, and dispositions that connect the history, philosophy, and values of the student affairs profession to one's current professional practice. This competency area embodies the foundations of the profession from which current and future research, scholarship, and practice will change and grow. The commitment to demonstrating this competency area ensures that our present and future practices are informed by an understanding of the profession's history, philosophy, and values.
Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER)	Focuses on the ability to design, conduct, critique, and use various AER methodologies and the results obtained from them, to utilize AER processes and their results to inform practice, and to shape the political and ethical climate

	surrounding AER processes and uses in higher education.
Law, Policy, and Governance (LPG)	Includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions relating to policy development processes used in various contexts, the application of legal constructs, compliance/policy issues, and the understanding of governance structures and their impact on one's professional practice.
Organizational and Human Resources (OHR)	Includes knowledge, skills, and dispositions used in the management of institutional human capital, financial, and physical resources. The competency area recognizes that student affairs professionals bring personal strengths and grow as managers through challenging themselves to build new skills in the selection, supervision, motivation, and formal evaluation of staff; resolution of conflict; management of the politics of organizational discourse; and the effective application of strategies and techniques associated with financial resources, facilities management, crisis management, risk management and sustainable resources.
Leadership (LEAD)	Addresses the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of a leader, with or without positional authority. Leadership involves both the individual role of a leader and the leadership process of individuals working together to envision, plan, and affect change in organizations and respond to broad-based constituencies and issues. This can include working with students, student affairs colleagues, faculty, and community members.
Social Justice and Inclusion (SJI)	While there are many conceptions of social justice and inclusion in various contexts, for the purposes of this competency area, it is defined here as both a process and a goal which includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups while

	<p>seeking to address and acknowledge issues of oppression, privilege, and power. The competency involves student affairs educators who have a sense of their own agency and social responsibility that includes others, their community, and the larger global context. Student affairs educators may incorporate social justice and inclusion competencies into their practice through seeking to meet the needs of all groups, equitably distributing resources, raising social consciousness, and repairing past and current harms on campus communities.</p>
Student Learning and Development (SLD)	<p>Addresses the concepts and principles of student development and learning theory. This includes the ability to apply theory to improve and inform student affairs and teaching practice.</p>
Technology (TECH)	<p>Focuses on the use of digital tools, resources, and technologies for the advancement of student learning, development, and success as well as the improved performance of student affairs professionals. Included within this area are knowledge, skills, dispositions, that lead to the generalization of digital literacy and general citizenship within communities of students, student affairs professionals, faculty members, and colleges and universities as a whole.</p>
Advising and Supporting (A/S)	<p>Addresses the knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to providing advising and support individuals and groups through direction, feedback, critique, referral, and guidance. Through developing advising and support strategies that take into account self-knowledge and the needs of others, we place critical roles in advancing the holistic wellness of ourselves, our students, and our colleagues.</p>

Appendix B

Survey

Thank you for your participation in this study. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability and choose the most appropriate answer. No personally identifiable information will be attached to your answers and your identity will remain anonymous. I hope to use this information to determine if grit is a predictor of longevity in the field of student affairs. Thank you for your time!

- 1) How would you identify your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
- 2) Ethnicity: Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
- 3) How would you describe yourself (select all that apply)
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
 - e. White
 - f. Write in _____

- 4) What is the highest educational degree you have completed?
 - a. High School Diploma
 - b. Associate's Degree
 - c. Bachelor's Degree
 - d. Master's Degree
 - e. Doctorate/JD
 - f. Other

- 5) Do you plan to complete another degree in Student Affairs?
 - a. Yes, I plan to obtain an Ed.D.
 - b. Yes, I plan to obtain a Ph.D.
 - c. No, but I plan to obtain another degree in another field
 - d. No, I do not plan to obtain any further educational degrees
 - e. I have not made a decision as of this point

- 6) How many academic years have you worked full-time in the field of student affairs post-master's degree completion (please do not include graduate assistantships)?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
 - f. 6
 - g. 7

- h. 8
 - i. 9
 - j. 10+
- 7) How many more years do you plan to remain working in student affairs full-time?
- a. 1 year or less
 - b. 2 years
 - c. 3 years
 - d. 4 years
 - e. 5 years
 - f. 6 years or more
- 8) Do you plan to remain working in student affairs full-time for the remainder of your career?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I am not sure
- 9) Select the functional area/department that best describes your *first* full-time professional work in student affairs post-master's degree (select all that apply):
- a. Not applicable
 - b. Academic Advising
 - c. Admissions
 - d. Alumni/Parent Programming
 - e. Athletics

- f. Bursar/Student Accounts
- g. Career Advising
- h. Development/Fundraising
- i. Financial Aid
- j. Greek Life
- k. Orientation
- l. Recreational Sports
- m. Residential Life/Housing Services
- n. Student Activities
- o. Student Conduct/Community Standards
- p. Student Leadership
- q. Title IX
- r. Other

10) What best describes your *current* functional department in student affairs?

- a. Not applicable
- b. Academic Advising
- c. Admissions
- d. Alumni/Parent Programming
- e. Athletics
- f. Bursar/Student Accounts
- g. Career Advising
- h. Development/Fundraising
- i. Financial Aid

- j. Greek Life
 - k. Orientation
 - l. Recreational Sports
 - m. Residential Life/Housing Services
 - n. Student Activities
 - o. Student Conduct/Community Standards
 - p. Student Leadership
 - q. Title IX
 - r. Other
- 11) What best describes your current institution where you are employed?
- a. Public 4-year
 - b. Private 4-year
 - c. Public 2-year
 - d. Private 2-year
 - e. Other
- 12) What best describes the undergraduate population at your current institution where you are employed?
- a. 5,000 or less
 - b. 5,001-15,000
 - c. Over 15,001
- 13) What best describes the environment of the undergraduate population at your current institution where you are employed?

- a. Primarily non-residential (fewer than 25% live on campus)
- b. Primarily residential (25%-49% live on campus)
- c. Highly residential (more than 50% live on campus)

14) Where is your current institution located (if multiple locations, select the state in which the location you work at is located)?

- a. Connecticut
- b. Maine
- c. Massachusetts
- d. New Hampshire
- e. New York
- f. Rhode Island
- g. Vermont

Grit-S Survey (Duckworth, 2019):

Please read each sentence and select the option that makes the most sense. Don't overthink the questions. Instead, just ask yourself how you compare—not just to your coworkers, friends or family—but to “most people” (Duckworth, 2016, pp. 54-55).

1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.
 - a. Very much like me
 - b. Mostly like me
 - c. Somewhat like me
 - d. Not much like me
 - e. Not like me at all

2. Setbacks don't discourage me.
 - a. Very much like me
 - b. Mostly like me
 - c. Somewhat like me
 - d. Not much like me
 - e. Not like me at all

3. I have been obsessed with a certain idea of a project for a short time but later lost interest.
 - a. Very much like me
 - b. Mostly like me
 - c. Somewhat like me
 - d. Not much like me
 - e. Not like me at all

4. I am a hard worker.
 - a. Very much like me
 - b. Mostly like me
 - c. Somewhat like me
 - d. Not much like me
 - e. Not like me at all

5. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
 - a. Very much like me
 - b. Mostly like me
 - c. Somewhat like me

- d. Not much like me
 - e. Not like me at all
6. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.
- a. Very much like me
 - b. Mostly like me
 - c. Somewhat like me
 - d. Not much like me
 - e. Not like me at all
7. I finish whatever I begin.
- a. Very much like me
 - b. Mostly like me
 - c. Somewhat like me
 - d. Not much like me
 - e. Not like me at all
8. I am diligent.
- a. Very much like me
 - b. Mostly like me
 - c. Somewhat like me
 - d. Not much like me
 - e. Not like me at all

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. This survey was used as permitted by Duckworth (2019) for educational research.

Appendix C

Scoring the Grit-S

(Duckworth, 2019)

Scoring: 1. For questions 2, 4, 7 and 8 assign the following points:

5 = Very much like me

4 = Mostly like me

3 = Somewhat like me

2 = Not much like me

1 = Not like me at all

For questions 1, 3, 5 and 6 assign the following points:

1 = Very much like me

2 = Mostly like me

3 = Somewhat like me

4 = Not much like me

5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 8. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

This survey was used as permitted by Duckworth (2019) for educational research.

