

Wellbeing Deficiency Among Wellbeing Professionals: Attrition in Student Affairs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to gain insight in the issue of turnover in Student Affairs at Virginia Tech, specifically within the health and wellbeing sector. Additionally, this project sought to identify specific reasonings for what caused employee turnover, and what can be done to combat this issue in the future. This qualitative research study consisted of semi-structured Zoom interviews with individuals who had left student affairs within the last two years. These individuals were professionals who had previously worked in Student Affairs at Virginia Tech, specifically the health and wellbeing sector. This study was guided by Herzberg's theory, which explains common factors that influence job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. After research and observation, practical insight emerged. Many participants reported multiple elements that contributed to their attrition, most of which align with Herzberg's theory.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Professional turnover has become a common trend across the field of higher education (Bichsel et al., 2022; Steele, 2022). While institutions are attempting to combat this issue by conducting searches to quickly fill vacated positions, this comes at a heavy cost of \$68 million per year, while little is being done to uncover why there are such high rates of turnover in higher education (Figueroa, 2015). Among higher education units facing the highest rates of attrition is the division of student affairs, with more than one-third of professionals actively job searching and over 50% stating that they are likely to leave their position within the next 12 months (Bichsel et al., 2022; Bluestone, 2022). There have been several studies completed to determine why this is such a vast issue; some of the rationales uncovered include job burnout, work overload, and lack of professional development and advancement, but the rationale varies by institution (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018). In recent years there has been a gap in published data, which can be attributed to anomalies associated with the COVID-19 pandemic; however, turnover is still an issue specifically at Virginia Tech (Allison Cross, personal communication, November 8, 2022).

One way to better understand professional turnover is through the lens of Herzberg's (1992) two-factor theory, which highlights underlying determinants of job satisfaction. It is a two-tier theory involving motivational factors and hygiene factors (Alshmemri et al., 2017). Hygiene factors are external factors that meet the basic needs of the employee. When these needs are satisfied, it leads to job satisfaction; but when they are not, it leads to job dissatisfaction. Examples of hygiene factors include salary, working conditions, colleague relationships, and leadership. Motivational factors are job elements that encourage employees to stay in their roles. When these are not satisfied, it leads to job dissatisfaction. Examples of motivational factors

include advancement, personal development, achievement, and variety. When analyzing the interplay of both factors in a professional setting, if both are satisfied, it leads to high job performance and commitment; however, when they are not satisfied, the opposite occurs (Amin et al., 2021).

Background and Setting

Virginia Tech is a land-grant university in southwest Virginia. Among the university's strategic priorities is to be a destination for talent (Virginia Tech, 2023b). As part of this strategic priority, Virginia Tech's goal is to attract, retain, and develop the talents of faculty and staff; attract, retain, and graduate students prepared to serve a global community; and support lifelong engagement and learning for alumni and local communities. To achieve this, the university must invest, empower, support, and value each of their employees and students. If they are successful, they should be able to attract new employees and prevent attrition amongst current employees.

In order to track progress towards being a destination for talent, several goals were set regarding career advancement opportunities and work life balance. The most recent data from the 2020-2021 climate survey, shows an increase in perceived career advancement opportunities amongst Administrative and Professional (AP) Faculty from 60.1% to 67.6%, but a decrease in work life balance from 78.8% to 76.6% (Virginia Tech, 2023a). This shows that there was progress made toward achieving one goal but regression with the other between the 2017-18 and 2020-21 climate surveys. However, since the last climate survey, the COVID-19 pandemic response has greatly affected the working environment for many university employees.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities have made drastic changes to maintain student learning without putting employee or student health at risk (Smalley, 2021). At Virginia Tech, these changes have affected departments university-wide (Virginia Tech Emergency Management, 2020). One area that experienced many changes was the student health and wellbeing sector of student affairs, which is comprised of Hokie Wellness, Schiffert Health Center, Cook Counseling Center, and Recreational Sports. Some of the changes faced by these departments include management and implementation of mandatory prevalence testing and restructuring of student service programs including recreational activities, medical care, and counseling (Shushok, 2021). Through the implementation of these changes, departments undertook additional responsibilities. When paired with the issue of employee turnover, additional strain was placed on the remaining employees (Allison Cross, personal communication, November 8, 2022).

Purpose, Research Questions, and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the student affairs turnover issue at Virginia Tech, specifically within the health and wellbeing sector, as they have faced additional responsibilities and strain due to COVID-19. Additionally, this project sought to identify specific reasons for employee turnover to identify the cause. The research questions guiding this study are:

- (a) What are the recurring elements that cause turnover amongst full-time student affairs professionals (full-time faculty, staff, and administration) within the health and wellbeing sector?
- (b) How did previous professionals describe their experiences working in student affairs?

The objective of this study is to potentially assist the student affairs department in uncovering why turnover is such a prominent issue at Virginia Tech. These results may also provide insight as to what can be done to help combat this issue in the future.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Across the last 20 years, there has been an increase in research aiming to pinpoint why student affairs is facing such high levels of attrition (Bichsel et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2006). Several recent studies have identified that as many as 50% of student affairs professionals expect to leave the field within the next year (Bichsel et al., 2022; Bluestone, 2022). Given the importance of student affairs at the collegiate level, the current research is critical in finding a solution to this growing problem.

Student Affairs

Student affairs was created to provide services to drive student learning outside of the classroom and help students overcome learning and personal challenges through offering counseling, tutoring, mentorship, and even career planning assistance. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA, 2022) recognizes student affairs departments to include (but are not limited to): diversity and inclusion, on-campus dining, residence programs, career and employment services, athletics and recreation, and academic services. Universities like Virginia Tech have programs specific to their university that help them better achieve the mission of the institution (Virginia Tech, 2023c). Although each university's division of student affairs is different, they share a desire for aiding students in academics, mental health, and well-being to improve their college experience.

Student affairs is comprised of a wide variety of professionals that aid in the execution of each program. This includes but is not limited to full-time professionals, wage employees, graduate assistants, and student employees, leaders, and interns. Of these, student affairs professionals (SAP) are the full-time professionals that are the first point of contact for students

and have been trained to assist in student crises (Lynch & Glass, 2019). To pursue a career in student affairs, professionals must complete graduate-level work and a complementary assistantship. Coursework is aimed to improve skills needed for creating relationships with students, faculty, staff, and parents (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Even after the extensive training professionals must complete, they are still leaving the field at alarming rates.

Attrition in Student Affairs

In recent history, attrition has become prevalent among student affairs professionals. Lorden (1998) reported that 50-60% of student affairs professionals leave within the first five years. Many research studies have been completed to determine the prevalent factors leading to this high attrition. Several noted factors have included job dissatisfaction due to role ambiguity, role conflict, role orientation, job burnout, work overload, stress, attractive career alternatives, non-competitive salaries, and perceived opportunities for advancement (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Tull, 2006). Each of these was explored further in several research studies. Additionally, methods for improving attrition rates have also been explored.

In a study completed by Marshall et. al (2016), individuals who left the student affairs profession were evaluated to determine what factors led to their departure. Of those who left the field, 41.7% had spent one to five years in the profession prior to leaving. The top reasons from respondents included extreme hours leading to burnout (52%), non-competitive salaries (48%), attractive career alternatives (42%), work/life conflict (34%), and limited advancement (32%). Another study examined the relationship between job stress burnout, job satisfaction, and turnover intention among student affairs professionals (Mullen et al., 2018). Of the respondents, 48.4% reported low-level burnout, 30.2% reported danger signs of burnout, 16.3% were

classified as being in burnout, 3.9% with very serious burnout, and 1.1% with professional help needed.

Potential Rationales

Many recent studies have explored this as an explanation for the increasing attrition through evaluating the past experiences of those who left the field of student affairs. Buchanan and Shupp (2015) interviewed individuals who left the field, and they found common reasonings for exit included lack of professional development opportunities, inadequate supervision and mentoring activities, and navigating the higher education political arena. Many of these reasons align with a more recent study conducted by Bichsel et. al (2022) in which individuals who were still in the field were surveyed to uncover reasons why they might exit the field. Bichsel et. al also cited seeking more professional development opportunities and working with new supervisors, while adding attention to pay/salary increases, remote working capabilities, and a more flexible schedule. In evaluating these articles, the rationale aligns with Herzberg's theory as they are all context-related factors (Buchanan & Shupp, 2015).

Another explored reasoning is synergistic supervision, theorizing that attrition is due to job dissatisfaction, which is a result of role ambiguity, role conflict, role orientation, job burnout, work overload, and perceived opportunities for goal attainment, professional development, and career advancement (Tull, 2006). Synergistic supervision was proposed as means of eliminating these factors through supervisors building open lines of communication and trusting relationships, providing feedback and evaluation, identifying professional aspirations of staff, and building the knowledge and skills necessary for professional advancement (Winston & Creamer, 1997). Tull (2006) explored this further and confirmed a significant correlation

between perceived synergistic supervision and job satisfaction, while a negative significant correlation was indicated between perceived synergistic supervision and intent to turnover. The same result was identified in a separate study conducted by Shupp and Arminio (2012) in which supervision practices were evaluated in the success of entry-level workers. A strong correlation between synergistic supervision and success was uncovered.

Herzberg's Theory

Herzberg's theory has been proposed as a potential theory outlining the reasoning for the high rate of turnover in student affairs as it explores underlying determinants of job satisfaction that can potentially be targeted with interventions (Herzberg et al., 1993). Herzberg's theory was developed in 1959 as a two-tier theory involving motivational factors and hygiene factors (Alshmemri et al., 2017). Hygiene factors are external factors that meet the basic needs of the employee. When these needs are satisfied, it leads to job satisfaction; but when they are not, it leads to job dissatisfaction. Examples of hygiene factors include salary, working conditions, colleague relationships, and leadership. Motivational factors are job elements that encourage employees to stay in their roles. When these are not satisfied, it leads to job dissatisfaction. Examples of motivational factors include advancement, personal development, achievement, and variety. When analyzing the interplay of both factors in a professional setting, if both are satisfied, it leads to high job performance and commitment; however, when they are not satisfied, the opposite occurs (Amin et al., 2021).

In previous studies, this theory was utilized to uncover turnover trends and how certain factors psychologically and sociologically impact professionals (Chiat & Panatik, 2019).

Herzberg's theory was selected as an appropriate framework for this study because it recognizes

and explains specific factors that lead to the phenomenon of job satisfaction and how it can contribute to turnover in the workplace. The concepts and methodologies outlined in this theory can help to surface the rationale for turnover in this study population and may also help discover areas of improvement in the student affairs department that can help combat turnover.

For this study, concepts were utilized to guide the formulation of interview questions to directly address both motivation and hygiene factors. Questions related to motivation factors ask participants to describe opportunities for advancement and personal and professional development related to their previous position. Additionally, questions related to hygiene factors ask participants to describe what improvements could have been made to prevent their exit, how colleague and/or supervisor relationships impacted experiences, and how salary aligned with their work commitments. By directly addressing each factor, it helps uncover how Herzberg's theory plays a role in student affairs positions.

Departmental Attrition in Student Affairs

Published research generally fails to outline the need for research focusing on specific areas or departments within student affairs. This prevents specific conclusions from being made for each department. Additionally, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, little research has been published about attrition in student affairs, even though there is no evidence that the issue of attrition has been resolved. When focusing on how the pandemic has affected student affairs employees, it is evident that university-wide changes have directly affect specific departments in student affairs (Virginia Tech Emergency Management, 2020). At Virginia Tech, one area that experienced many changes was the student health and wellbeing sector of student affairs, which is comprised of Hokie Wellness, Schiffert Health Center, Cook Counseling Center, and

Recreational Sports. Some of the changes faced by these departments include management and implementation of mandatory prevalence testing and restructuring of student service programs, including recreational activities, medical care, and counseling (Shushok, 2021). Through the implementation of these changes, departments undertook additional responsibilities. When paired with the issue of employee turnover, additional strain was placed on the remaining employees (Allison Cross, personal communication, November 8, 2022).

Summary

Overall, a common trend across the literature is that attrition can be attributed to inadequate supervision, burnout, and non-competitive salaries; however, each university is different, and there is a gap in research. When considering these factors, a conclusion cannot be made about what causes attrition in Student Affairs at Virginia Tech without further research. Due to this, there is reasoning to conduct a research study to determine areas to improve attrition rates in Student Affairs at Virginia Tech. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is cause to focus on the health and wellbeing sector as they have faced such a high degree of restructuring.

Chapter 3: Methodology

For this study, the health and wellbeing sector of student affairs at Virginia Tech was studied, specifically, individuals who had left this area within the last two years. This area encompasses four different departments: Recreational Sports, Hokie Wellness, Cook Counseling Center, and Schiffert Health Center. This study focused on the connection between turnover in this sector and Herzberg's theory. Qualitative methods were utilized to collect data in the form of face-to-face interviews. The interview questions were framed to address two primary research questions:

- (a) What are the recurring elements that cause turnover amongst full-time student affairs professionals (full-time faculty, staff, and administration) within the health and wellbeing sector?
- (b) How did previous professionals describe their experiences working in student affairs?

Reflexivity Statement

Within my first two years of college, I knew I wanted to pursue student affairs as a career. When I was at my lowest point, they were there to pick me up and help in any way they could to further my development as a student, professional, and person. It is through student affairs that I have been offered many opportunities including DEI workshops, higher education conferences, and eventually even a graduate assistantship to help me pursue my dream of working in student affairs.

This experience has allowed me to build relationships with many student affairs professionals (SAP) beyond recreational sports and formulate a better understanding of how the department works as a cohesive unit to serve students.

To further pursue this career, I would need to further my education to obtain a master's degree. I researched for months to find a program with the perfect fit. I finally choose OMALS because I wanted to remain at Virginia Tech, and it would give me the opportunity to research what I was passionate about. I have so much more development to do in recreational sports, and I know that this program will give me the opportunity to do so.

I researched many topics related to student affairs, and I continued circling back to one area, turnover. During my last year as a supervisor before starting my graduate assistantship, I became aware of the same issue that was present in my community growing up. Finding individuals to work in youth or student development is extremely difficult, and retaining those individuals is even more difficult. It is time-consuming and often overwhelming work. Many of the student affairs professionals that I had worked with over the last three years were leaving the field, and many of their positions have remained vacant for months. The question that kept recurring to me is “why?”

In the development of this project, I had to be aware of my personal relationship with the department. I worked in conjunction with members of my graduate research committee and professionals in student affairs to ensure that my research would be both objective and informative. Additionally, these individuals helped ensure that I was able to pursue this research without creating ethical concerns due to my relationship with the division and research subjects.

Research Design

This study used a phenomenology research design following the transcendental approach outlined by Moustakas (1994). Following this design, several individuals who were part of the group of interest—previous full-time student affairs professionals at Virginia Tech—participated in semi-structured interviews in which they described their experiences working in the same

department. Prior to initiating research interviews, two pilot interviews were conducted to ensure that the research questions adequately addressed to research questions. The purpose of these interviews was to analyze their experiences/perceptions and how those led to their ultimate decision to exit their position.

Sample Selection

The individual/group of focus was student affairs professionals that have left Virginia Tech within the last two years. To obtain a list of names of these individuals, the researcher met with department directors for Hokie Wellness, Recreational Sports, Cook Counseling Center, and Schiffert Health Center. Upon institutional review board (IRB) approval, these individuals agreed to reach out to those who have left their department, informing them of the study and obtaining updated contact information (i.e., emails), if they consented for it to be shared. Upon retrieval of contact information, the researcher began recruitment of these individuals into the study. Twenty-four participants were contacted. Of those, seven people agreed to participate. Those who consented to participate in the study completed a semi-structured interview via Zoom. Zoom interviews were chosen over in-person interviews as the population group was no longer accessible for in-person research. Interview questions were framed to address the two primary research questions and align with Herzberg's theory. Additionally, at the conclusion of each interview participants were given the opportunity to recruit additional participants by way of snowball sampling. This allowed additional recruitment of student affairs professionals. The participant information sheet, interview protocol and recruitment email can be referenced in Appendices A, B, and C. In total, seven participants elected to participate in the interviews. The participant demographic breakdown is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1*Demographic Data of Study Participants (n = 7)*

| Demographic | % of total participants |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Gender | |
| Female | 100.0 |
| Male | 0.0 |
| Race | |
| White or Caucasian | 71.4 |
| Black or African American | 14.3 |
| Asian or Pacific Islander | 14.3 |
| Educational Level | |
| Associate | 14.3 |
| Bachelors | 28.6 |
| Masters | 57.1 |
| Level of Employment | |
| Clinician | 28.6 |
| Manager or Coordinator | 28.6 |
| Assistant Director | 14.3 |
| Associate Director | 28.6 |
| Division | |
| Cook Counseling | 42.8 |
| Recreational Sports | 42.8 |
| Hokie Wellness | 14.3 |
| Time in Last Position | |
| <1 year | 28.6 |
| 1 year | 28.6 |
| 2 years | 14.3 |
| 3 years | 0.0 |
| 4 years | 14.3 |
| 5 or more years | 14.3 |

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through interviews with open-ended questions designed specifically to answer the research questions and align with Herzberg's theory. These interviews were recorded using Zoom audio recording and auto-transcribed utilizing the Otter.ai tool embedded within Virginia Tech's Zoom license. Data coding and analysis was done following Moustakas's (1994)

transcendental approach in which transcribed interviews are deductively coded to identify significant statements within each interview that align with distinct categories. Codes were based on motivational and hygiene reasonings for attrition which are outlined in Herzberg's (1993) theory. These reasonings were assessed to construct a cohesive description of the phenomenon that addresses the research questions. Upon conclusion of data analysis, all quotes that were included in the study were sent out to participants to review to ensure validity and anonymity.

Chapter 4: Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This section contains the results that were collected from interviews with seven previous Virginia Tech Student Affairs Employees who had left within the last two years. Interviews were conducted in the Spring of 2023. This was conducted utilizing a qualitative case study design. Findings were analyzed using Herzberg's theory and were directed towards answering the two research questions:

- (a) What are the recurring elements that cause turnover amongst full-time student affairs professionals (full-time faculty, staff, and administration) within the health and wellbeing sector?
- (b) How did previous professionals describe their experiences working in student affairs?

Factors

The findings were sorted to address specific factors based on those found in Herzberg's theory. The major factors were motivational and hygiene. The factors were then subdivided into smaller elements that compose these factors.

Motivational Factors

Specific to motivational factors, these elements observed include: Advancement, Job Content, Growth, Responsibility, and Recognition (Table 2).

Table 2

Motivational Factor Elements and Supporting Their Existence in the Health and Wellbeing Sector of Student Affairs at Virginia Tech

| Element | Evidence |
|----------------|--|
| Advancement | <p><i>“When the opportunities for advancement arose, I was able to apply for those things and try and get them. And so, for me that experience was pretty positive.” (P6)</i></p> <p><i>“I think to advance up position wise is more challenging just because of the lack of availability.” (P7)</i></p> <p><i>“I would feel ... I felt like there was no real opportunity for advancement.” (P13)</i></p> |
| Job Content | <p><i>“But all the things I was doing before didn't fall off. So, it was like you're moving up here are some extra things, but we still need you to do the same things that you were doing before.” (P9)</i></p> <p><i>“It felt like there was a push to do more, do more, do more. And sometimes I think that can feel hard because you're still the same amount of people with the same amount of resources trying to do maybe more than you were trying to do.” (P6)</i></p> <p><i>“It [Health and Wellbeing] was all that I talked about, and all that I worked on were those type of programs, and those are things. I just couldn't do anymore. So mentally, it started to just feel not right, like a good fit anymore.” (P7)</i></p> |
| Growth | <p><i>“I have felt and experienced support for like professional development that's offered within student affairs so like different webinars or courses.” (P8)</i></p> <p><i>“I learned a lot through working with my colleagues, I was given support to attend conferences in order to increase you know my skill set. I did a lot on my own to read and grow in that area” (P10)</i></p> |
| Responsibility | <p><i>“I didn't have the benefit of having a faculty opinion. So, whatever I said I felt like fell on deaf ears. I just felt like I couldn't help my staff with their issues, because I would relay the message, but then, would be told, ‘we will look into that’, and then nothing ever happened.” (P12)</i></p> |

| Element | Evidence |
|-------------|---|
| | <p><i>“Like it just felt like they didn't think that you could do the job on your own, even though it was your job. It just felt very redundant sometimes, like sitting in the room with 6 people when it needed to be 2, and that's frustrating.” (P7)</i></p> |
| Recognition | <p><i>“I do feel like they were recognizing the work I was doing. Whether it was like handled right is a different thing, but I do feel like it was recognized.” (P9)</i></p> |
| | <p><i>“It doesn't cost anything to tell someone that they appreciate your work. Or to say thank you, and to you know, to show gratitude. And I think you know while they were saying that they weren't really doing it. Yeah, that that was the most frustrating part.” (P12)</i></p> |

Advancement addresses the ability for employees to advance to a higher-level position than where they are currently. All participants had some mention of advancement. Out of these seven, three felt as though they had opportunities for advancement. One of these stated: “When the opportunities for advancement arose, I was able to apply for those things and try and get them. And so, for me that experience was pretty positive” (P6). The remaining four participants noted that they felt as though there was no real opportunity for advancement within their position. One of these participants noted, “I think to advance up position wise is more challenging just because of the lack of availability” (P7). It is important to note that out of these four participants, two were not dissatisfied that they would not be able to advance, and it did not contribute to their exit.

Job content addresses any reference to the work content of the position itself. This includes job duty alignment and the job duties themselves. Six participants had some mention of job content, and all were negative. One participant stated: “It felt like there was a push to do more, do more, do more. And sometimes I think that can feel hard because you're still the same amount of people with the same amount of resources trying to do maybe more than you were

trying to do” (P6). Another noted: “But all the things I was doing before didn't fall off. So, it was like you're moving up here are some extra things, but we still need you to do the same things that you were doing before” (P9). A different subject stated: “It [Health and Wellbeing] was all that I talked about, and all that I worked on were those type of programs, and those are things. I just couldn't do anymore. So mentally, it started to just feel not right, like a good fit anymore” (P7). This participant also stated: “When the 5 O'clock would come, and your job is not done yet—like there's stuff in your day that you didn't get done because too many meetings or too many things that not all these people need to be involved in when it could be slimmer, and more jobs could get done” (P7).

Growth addresses any reference to personal or professional growth related to the position. All seven participants mentioned opportunities related to personal or professional growth. All seven mentioned positive experiences related to professional growth, and two of the seven participants reported having negative experiences with personal growth. Five participants noted support for professional growth in relation to attending conferences or webinars. Specifically, one noted: “I have felt and experienced support for like professional development that's offered within student affairs so like different webinars or courses” (P8). Meanwhile, six noted that they felt as though there was support with advancing skill. For example, one participant stated: “There was so much support for advancements within your ability and your skill, our means to professional development were really strong and really supported” (P7). Regarding negative personal development, one participant noted how their position had a negative impact on their personal life stating: “I would say personal development wise, I really felt like I was deteriorating. It had a really negative impact on my marriage, on my physical health” (P13).

Responsibility addresses any reference to responsibility and/or authority related to the position (i.e., the freedom to make decisions). Two out of seven participants had any mention related to responsibility, with both of these being negative. One participant stated: “It just felt like they didn't think that you could do the job on your own, even though it was your job. It just felt very redundant sometimes, like sitting in the room with 6 people when it needed to be 2, and that's frustrating” (P7). While another stated: “I didn't have the benefit of having a faculty opinion. So, whatever I said I felt like fell on deaf ears. I just felt like I couldn't help my staff with their issues, because I would relay the message, but then, would be told, ‘we will look into that,’ and then nothing ever happened” (P12).

Recognition is related to any reference of acknowledgement of accomplishing difficult work or the amount of work being completed. Four out of seven participants had some mention of recognition, with all of these being negative. Several participants noted feeling like the work they were doing was not recognized, while some also felt that they were not appreciated. One participant stated: “I do feel like they were recognizing the work I was doing. Whether it was like handled right is a different thing, but I do feel like it was recognized” (P9). Another participant stated: “It doesn't cost anything to tell someone that they appreciate your work. Or to say ‘thank you,’ and to you know, to show gratitude. And I think you know while they were saying that they weren't really doing it. Yeah, that that was the most frustrating part” (P12).

Achievement is the last element of motivational factors in Herzberg’s theory. Out of seven participants, no participants had any reference to achievement related to the position.

Hygiene Factors

Specific to hygiene factors, the elements observed include: Interpersonal Relationships, Salary, Company Policies and Administration, and Supervision (Table 3).

Table 3

Hygiene Factor Elements and Supporting Their Existence in the Health and Wellbeing Sector of Student Affairs at Virginia Tech

| Element | Evidence |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Interpersonal Relationships | <p><i>“I am so blessed to have had the best colleagues and supervisors. That was probably the reason why I hung on longer than what I should have by staying in the department in that career was because of the people that I worked with. Everybody was passionate about being there. It was fun. I had good personal relationships with everybody. Everybody was very supportive of each other's work.” (P7)</i></p> <p><i>“I enjoyed working with all my colleagues very much. I always found support there.” (P10)</i></p> |
| Salary | <p><i>“It felt too little, and I think that that was a very common feeling amongst the staff, especially when comparing to colleagues at different universities within the same department or same roles. Our salary was low.” (P7)</i></p> <p><i>“I did try to negotiate a higher salary in the beginning, and I was promptly shut down.” (P13)</i></p> <p><i>“I would say that the pay did not match the advancement.” (P9)</i></p> |
| Company Policies and Administration | <p><i>“There were no clear communications. It would have been better if there were clear communications of expectations.” (P13)</i></p> <p><i>“I think that if the leadership had been more communicative, and if there had been more transparency and just instruction. They're just seem to be mixed messages. We would be told one thing one week, and then two weeks later a decision was made, and there were changes. There wasn't a formal protocol or procedures.” (P12)</i></p> |

| Element | Evidence |
|-------------|--|
| Supervision | <p data-bbox="526 247 1320 432"><i>“There was not a lot of supervisory support or input for other employees when creating policies that impacted them. And it was kind of an environment where the supervisors would tell you what you were going to do, and it wasn't really an option for anyone else.” (P12)</i></p> <p data-bbox="526 470 1320 646"><i>“I just felt very, I felt vilified. I did not feel like my supervisor was supporting me. I felt like [they] thought that I was this uncontrollable monster really, and that that was just a given. And so, [they] would tell me these things, but there was nothing that I could do to make anything better.” (P13)</i></p> |

Interpersonal relationships addresses any reference to personal or working relationships with superiors, subordinates, or peers related to the position. All seven participants had some mention of interpersonal relationships, all of which were mostly positive. These participants noted how their colleague relationships were one of the best parts of the job. One participant in particular stated: “I am so blessed to have had the best colleagues and supervisors. That was probably the reason why I hung on longer than what I should have by staying in the department in that career was because of the people that I worked with. Everybody was passionate about being there. It was fun. I had good personal relationships with everybody. Everybody was very supportive of each other's work” (P7). Three mentioned how they felt supported by their colleagues. One of these stated: “I enjoyed working with all my colleagues very much. I always found support there” (P10). When asked specifically how diversity impacted their interpersonal relationships, six participants noted a racial imbalance in the workplace. One participant noted how this imbalance affected them in the workplace. They noted: “My facial expressions were often misinterpreted. I was referred to as angry when I actually wasn't, and I knew it was racism. I knew it was micro aggression, and it got to be too much by a certain point” (P13).

Salary addresses any reference to compensation associated with the position and how well it aligns with the position itself. All seven participants had some mention of salary, six of

which were negative. One participant noted how their salary was much less than those at other universities in the same role. They noted: “It felt too little, and I think that that was a very common feeling amongst the staff, especially when comparing to colleagues at different universities within the same department or same roles. Our salary was low” (P7). Another mentioned how they received compensation with advancement, but it was not comparable to the amount of work they had to complete. They stated: “I would say that the pay did not match the advancement” (P9). In relation to this, another participant noted how they received a promotion and were promised a raise that they did not receive. They stated: “I was actually promised a raise after I accepted ... and a few months later I asked about it. I asked 3 separate times, and never see so much as a response. No, ‘we're getting around to it.’ There was never a reply. So, I didn't ever get that raise” (P12). Finally, one participant mentioned asking for a higher salary when accepting the position. They noted: “I did try to negotiate a higher salary in the beginning, and I was promptly shut down” (P13).

Company policies and administration addresses any reference to company policies and/or management related to the position. Out of the seven participants, two mentioned company policies and administration, both of which were negative. One spoke to how there was lack of transparency and formal protocol: “I think that if the leadership had been more communicative, and if there had been more transparency and just instruction. They're just seem to be mixed messages. We would be told one thing one week, and then two weeks later a decision was made, and there were changes. There wasn't a formal protocol or procedures” (P12). This participant also noted how they did not receive any formal training when starting their position: “I didn't have any training in the job that I was hired to do” (P12). Another participant noted how there

was not communication of expectation with the position: “There were no clear communications. It would have been better if there were clear communications of expectations” (P13).

Supervision addresses any reference to employee supervision related to employee development and support with their position. Six participants had some mention of supervision. Two participants had positive experiences with supervision. One noted: “I worked for 3 different directors, I guess, within the [department] over my years, and felt supported by them. For the most part, two were very good” (P10). Meanwhile, four participants noted having negative experiences with supervision. One of these said: “There was not a lot of supervisory support or input for other employees when creating policies that impacted them. And it was kind of an environment where the supervisors would tell you what you were going to do, and it wasn't really an option for anyone else” (P12). This participant also noted: “It was just this was the stress of the position, and it just didn't get any better as time went on. When I ultimately actually ended up in the hospital because of it ... [and] then, when I got out, just the way my supervisor treated me: It was just no empathy when coming back to work” (P12). A different participant noted: “Like people would listen to an extent when you said you're overwhelmed, but it was not followed up by action” (P9). Another participant said: “I just felt very, I felt vilified. I did not feel like my supervisor was supporting me. I felt like [they] thought that I was this uncontrollable monster really, and that that was just a given. And so, [they] would tell me these things, but there was nothing that I could do to make anything better” (P13). This participant also stated: “I had really become a shell of the person that I was. I started off this position feeling happy, feeling like I belonged; and after that supervisor, I was very quiet. I felt afraid to say anything ever. It felt like it would be misconstrued. My facial expressions were often misinterpreted” (P13).

Working conditions is the last element of hygiene factors in Herzberg's theory. Out of seven participants, no participants had any reference to working conditions related to the position.

Conclusions

In relation to the research questions, both were addressed and explored. The first question was: "What are the recurring elements that cause turnover amongst full-time student affairs professionals (full-time faculty, staff, and administration) within the health and wellbeing sector?" When reviewing the comprehensive interview transcript from each respondent, it was evident that each participant placed emphasis on a different combination of elements when deciding to leave their position; however, there were several issues that were recurrent across multiple interviews and could be seen as problem areas in student affairs. These include poor job duty alignment, lack of career advancement opportunities, lack of responsibility when in supervisory roles, lack of recognition from supervisors and administration, poor salary alignment, unsatisfactory company policies and administration, and poor supervision. Assuming that there are other individuals in student affairs with similar experiences to those who left, improving upon each of these elements would be beneficial in preventing the exit of more professionals in the future.

The second research question was: "How did previous professionals describe their experiences working in student affairs?" When analyzing how each individual described their working experiences, it became evident that each person had profoundly different situations that were influenced by supervisory relationships, job content, and several other elements. A common trend amongst interviews was if one element was particularly important to an individual

and their needs towards this element were not being met, it led to a negative perception of the position, even if they did have positive experiences with other elements. This made it evident that it takes more positive elements to outweigh a single negative element. It also became clear that not addressing these elements is what leads to high rates of attrition, emphasizing the importance of improving upon each of these elements.

The results from these interviews correlate with previously mentioned studies focusing on attrition in student affairs, specifically those completed by Tull (2006), Bichsel et al. (2022), Marshall et al. (2016), and Mullen et al. (2018). Recurrent elements from these studies that were present among participants include: role conflict, work overload, work ambiguity, non-competitive salaries, and perceived opportunities for advancement. Elements that were found in these studies but were not found among participants were work/life conflict and extreme hour requirements.

In accordance with Herzberg's (1993) theory, motivational factors lead to job satisfaction and hygiene factors lead to job dissatisfaction. When motivational factors are satisfied, they can outweigh potential hygiene factors that may be present; however, if motivational factors are not found and hygiene factors are found, it can lead to attrition (Amin et al., 2021). When analyzing the interviews conducted, it was evident that few motivational factors were being satisfied and multiple hygiene factors were present, which could have contributed to the turnover among participants. More specifically, participants noted that there were few advancement opportunities, they had negative feelings towards job content (specifically noting job duty alignment as an issue), they did not feel as though they had the responsibility they should in their position, and they did not feel recognized by superiors and other administration for the work they were completing. All of these are motivational factors that should lead to job satisfaction. Since

they were not satisfied, hygiene factors became more prominent. These factors were poor salary alignment, unsatisfactory company policies and administration, and mixed feelings towards supervision (some participants had positive experiences while others had negative experiences); however, the mention of interpersonal relationships was predominantly positive. In conclusion, when analyzing the results in comparison to Herzberg's theory, they are consistent with the underlying concepts of the theory.

When analyzing data outside of this theory, two other emerging themes were present: lack of prioritization of employee health and wellbeing and lack of diversity amongst employees. When analyzing interview data related to health and wellbeing, a recurring topic was the lack of prioritization of health and wellbeing amongst employees. Three participants specifically noted how they felt as though the position was directly affecting their personal health and wellbeing in a negative way. One stated: "I had really become a shell of the person that I was. I started off this position feeling happy, feeling like I belonged; and after that supervisor, I was very quiet. I felt afraid to say anything ever. It felt like it would be misconstrued. My facial expressions were often misinterpreted" (P13). Another stated: "It was just this was the stress of the position, and it just it didn't get any better as time went on. When I ultimately actually ended up in the hospital because of it ... [and] then, when I got out, just the way my supervisor treated me: It was just no empathy when coming back to work" (P12). One participant even mentioned how they promoted health and wellbeing through their position and was not able to prioritize their own in that position: "It [Health and Wellbeing] was all that I talked about, and all that I worked on were those type of programs, and those are things. I just couldn't do anymore. So mentally, it started to just feel not right, like a good fit anymore" (P7).

In comparing these results to a study conducted by Chessman (2021), similar results were found when conducting a larger scale study focusing on health and wellbeing among student affairs professionals. In positions where promotion of health and wellbeing for students is seen as a priority, oftentimes these same individuals are the ones that have the lowest well-being scores. For example, when comparing wellbeing scores of student affairs professionals to the Brief Inventory of Thriving scale, it was found that these professionals were between the fiftieth and seventy-fifth percentile. This is often due to job duty alignment, control at work, and overall quality of work life.

When analyzing data related to diversity, it was evident that there was a significant lack of diversity amongst employees in this sector of student affairs, specifically racial diversity. This is relevant as in one case it led to racial microaggressions towards students and other employees, which led to a hostile work environment and feelings of being ostracized. A report written by Pritchard and McChesney (2018) explored the racial differences of student affairs professionals nationally and revealed that 71% of all student affairs professionals are white, and 51% of all student affairs professionals are white females. This emphasizes how there is a drastic gender discrepancy among student affairs professionals and an even greater racial discrepancy. In applying these results to the interview data collected, it is evident that there is a potential diversity issue within Virginia Tech Student Affairs that could be contributing to the issue of attrition.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations of the study, which could impact the application of results. First, one department of interest—Schiffert Health Center—was unable to obtain and provide

valid email addresses for those who had left within the last two years. This could lead to inclusion bias as there was not a full representation of all health and wellbeing departments at Virginia Tech. In relation to this, there was not an accurate spread of diversity amongst participants as there were seven female and no male participants. Additionally, with there being only seven participants, it is possible some potential themes and insights were missed. Future researchers may consider further exploring the application of Herzberg's theory in Virginia Tech Student Affairs with a larger study group and more diverse population in terms of race and gender.

Recommendations for Practice

There are several recommendations by participants for Virginia Tech Student Affairs to further mediate the issue of turnover, some of which align with their strategic plan. A recurring recommendation amongst participants was having better job duty alignment with the capabilities of one employee. Many participants noted this as an issue that led to their exit, which makes this relevant. This aligns with prior noted research from Tull (2006), Bichsel et al. (2022), Marshall et al. (2016), and Mullen et al. (2018), who noted how role imbalances leads to increased burnout, stress, and attrition. Additionally, salary alignment should also be mediated as most employees noted feeling as though they were not paid enough for their position and were paid less at Virginia Tech than the same position at competing universities. This component is currently being mediated by Virginia Tech to achieve one of its strategic priorities; however, the current focus with this mediation is for teaching and research faculty as opposed to administrative and professional faculty (Virginia Tech, 2023b). Another recommendation from a couple of participants was a need for more clear communication from supervisors and

administration on what is expected of them and having more staff input on policies that are put in place that affect them. This aligns with prior research from Buchanan and Shupp (2015) regarding how supervision impacts job satisfaction and therefore employee retention. This could be achieved through offering employee and supervisor trainings and research and consulting on policies prior to implementation.

When reviewing the results, there are two other recommendations to mediate the issue of turnover at Virginia Tech. First, factors that contribute to job dissatisfaction (i.e., hygiene factors) should be prioritized. By limiting employee dissatisfaction, it in turn limits their desire to leave their position. Additionally, motivational factors that aid in job satisfaction should also be prioritized as they mediate hygiene factors that cannot be improved upon. With that being said, the primary elements of focus, based on this study, should be job duty alignment, salary, recognition, and supervision. These factors could also be mitigated through the application of synergistic supervision techniques, which focus on building open lines of communication with supervisors and providing applicable feedback (Winston & Creamer, 1997). As noted previously there is a significant negative correlation between perceived synergistic supervision and intent to turnover, indicating that this technique would be beneficial for mitigating previously mentioned factors that lead to dissatisfaction (Tull, 2006). The other recommendation aligns with mediating some of these elements but also addresses another. Many employees noted feeling overwhelmed by the excessive responsibilities due to job vacancies or lack of needed positions. To mediate this, changes should be made to job recruitment and hiring processes to fill positions more quickly and take the strain off employees that are currently in the affected positions.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Savanna Lumpkin, and I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech. As part of my graduate project, I am interviewing previous Virginia Tech Student Affairs professionals who have left the field within the last two years. The purpose of this project is to gain better insight into why there is turnover in student affairs.

You were identified to participate in this project as you have met the inclusion criteria of being a student affairs professional who left their position at Virginia Tech within the last two years. If you agree to participate in this project, we will schedule a Zoom interview that will take approximately 20-30 minutes of your time. The answers you provide in this interview will be confidential. For more information on your rights as a participant, please see the attached information sheet.

If you are interested in learning more about this project and potentially serving as a participant, please reply to this email.

Thank you for your time,

Savanna

Appendix B: Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Project



Information Sheet for Participation in an Interview

Principal Investigator: Eric Kaufman PhD

Student Researcher: Savanna Lumpkin

IRB# and Title of Project: # 22-1094, Attrition in Student Affairs at Virginia Tech

You are invited to participate in an interview as a part of an academic project. This form includes information about the project and contact information if you have any questions.

I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I am conducting this project as part of my course work.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

You were identified to participate in this project because you have left a student affairs position at Virginia Tech within the past two years.

If you decide to participate in this project, you will complete a one-on-one Zoom interview with a member of the project team. As part of the interview, you will be invited to answer a series of questions intended to uncover recurring factors that cause turnover amongst full-time Student Affairs professionals at Virginia Tech. In your responses you will be asked to reflect upon a specific position that you left within the last two years. In order to help ensure accuracy of project findings, the interview will be recorded.

The interview should take approximately 20-30 minutes of your time.

We do not anticipate any risks for completing this project.

You can choose whether to be in this project or not. If you volunteer to be in this project, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and remain a part of the project. The investigator may withdraw you from this project if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any data collected during this project will be kept confidential by the project team. Your interview will be digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed. The project team will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected computer. The project team will maintain a list that includes a key to the code. The master key and the recordings will be stored for 3 years after the project has been completed and then destroyed.

WHO CAN I TALK TO?

If you have any questions or concerns about the project, please feel free to contact Savanna Lumpkin at savanna@vt.edu or Eric Kaufman at ekaufman@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this project. If you have questions regarding your rights as a study participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

This section contains the semi-structured interview questions to be asked during this study. Additional questions may be asked to further broaden the participants' responses.

Introduction: "Hello. My name is Savanna, and I am conducting interviews to help uncover why individuals are leaving Student Affairs at Virginia Tech. Further details on the study and your potential participation were included in the information sheet I previously emailed. Do you have any questions about the study?"

[Pause to allow for any questions and respond to them as needed.]

Verbal consent to interview: "To help ensure I can accurately represent your responses; I would like to record the interview. Do I have your permission to record the interview?"

[Confirm a positive response before recording.]

Interview questions: "When answering each question please reflect on the Student Affairs position at Virginia Tech that you left within the last two years."

1. How would you describe your working experiences in your position at Virginia Tech?
 - a. How would you say this position compared to your initial expectations?
2. What prompted you to begin searching for a new position?
3. What was your primary reasoning for exiting your position in student affairs?
 - a. What other factors contributed to leaving your position?
 - b. Do you recall your formal reasoning for leaving your position, and was that stated reason different from what you have already shared here?
4. I am particularly interested in your experience with factors that sometimes contribute to job satisfaction (a.k.a. motivational factors)
 - a. How would you describe your opportunities for advancement with the Student Affairs position at Virginia Tech?
 - b. How would you describe your personal and professional development during your time in this position?
5. I am also interested in your experience with factors that sometimes contribute to job dissatisfaction (a.k.a. hygiene factors)
 - a. What improvements could have been made to prevent your exit from the Student Affairs position at Virginia Tech?
 - b. How would you say your colleague and/or supervisor relationships impacted your experiences in this position?
 - c. How would you say your salary aligned with your work commitments? Would you say you were paid too little or too much?
6. Is there any other information that you would like to share regarding your experiences working in student affairs?

Demographic questions: "Because I want to be able to accurately describe the types of people included in my study, there are a few demographic questions I am hoping you will answer."

1. What gender do you identify as?

2. What is your age?
3. How would you describe your ethnicity?
4. How would you describe the diversity of your work environment?
5. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
6. In what division of student affairs was the position at Virginia Tech that you left within the past two years?
7. Did you consider yourself a student employee?
8. What was your level of employment in the position you left? For example: manager, coordinator, assistant director, associate director, director.
9. How many years (or months) were you in this position prior to departure?
10. What career path have you entered since leaving this position?

Snowball Sampling:

1. Is there anyone else that you know of that left the health and wellbeing sector of Student Affairs at Virginia Tech within the last two years that might like to participate in this study?
 - a. If yes: Would you be willing to share their name and current email address?
 - b. If no: continue to the closing statement

Closing statement: “Thank you for your time and participating in this study. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to utilize the contact information that can be found in your informational email.”

Appendix D: Interview Coding Sheet

Participant Number: _____

Herzberg's Theory (Herzberg et al., 1993) Factors that Impact Job Satisfaction

Motivational Factors: intrinsic job elements that affect the subject's job satisfaction.

- Advancement: **ADV**
 - Any reference to advancement related to the position.
- Job Content: **JCON**
 - Any reference to content of the work itself related to the position.
- Growth: **GRO**
 - Any reference to personal or professional growth related to the position.
- Responsibility: **RES**
 - Any reference to responsibility and/or authority related to the position.
- Recognition: **REC**
 - Any reference to positive or negative recognition related to the position.
- Achievement: **ACH**
 - Any reference to positive or negative achievement related to the position.

Hygiene Factors: extrinsic job elements that affect the subject's basic needs and lead to job dissatisfaction.

- Interpersonal Relationships: **INTR**
 - Any reference to personal or working relationships with superiors, subordinates, or peers related to the position.
- Salary: **SAL**
 - Any reference compensation or lack thereof related to the position.
- Company Policies and Administration: **CPA**
 - Any reference to company policies or management related to the position.
- Supervision: **SUP**
 - Any reference to employee's supervisor related to the position.
- Working Conditions: **WC**
 - Any reference to physical surroundings related to the position.

What other categories or themes emerged?