

# NAVIGATING THE STUDENT AFFAIRS LANDSCAPE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF THE STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSION FROM CANADIAN PERSPECTIVES

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## Abstract

This autoethnographic study examines the evolving professional landscape of student affairs in Canada through the lived experiences of five scholar-practitioners. Drawing on reflective narratives and thematic analysis, the study explores three central themes: unplanned career entry into student affairs, the expanding and complex demands placed on practitioners, and the dynamic construction of professional identity. Framed by the job demands-resources model and social ecological systems theory, this research reveals how intersecting personal, institutional, and systemic forces may shape the careers and commitments of student affairs professionals. Findings highlight tensions between credentialism and experiential knowledge, the emotional toll of equity work, and the precarity of institutional belonging. This article offers a nuanced understanding of the student affairs profession and calls for more inclusive, relational, and critically reflexive approaches to professional development, institutional policy, and workforce sustainability. It contributes to emerging discourses on practitioner well-being, professionalization, and systemic transformation in higher education.

**Keywords:** student affairs professionals, credentialism, professional identity, equity and inclusion

## Résumé

Cette étude autoethnographique examine l'évolution du paysage professionnel des affaires étudiantes au Canada à travers les expériences vécues de cinq universitaires-praticiens. S'appuyant sur des récits réflexifs et une analyse thématique, l'étude explore trois thèmes centraux : l'entrée non planifiée dans le domaine des affaires étudiantes, les exigences croissantes et complexes imposées aux praticiens, ainsi que la construction dynamique de l'identité professionnelle. Ancrée dans le modèle des exigences et des ressources professionnelles (Job Demands-Resources Model) et la théorie des systèmes

socio-écologiques (Social Ecological Systems Theory), cette recherche met en lumière la manière dont les forces personnelles, institutionnelles et systémiques s'entrecroisent pour façonner les carrières et les engagements des professionnels des affaires étudiantes. Les résultats mettent en évidence les tensions entre la diplômanie (credentialism) et le savoir expérientiel, la charge émotionnelle du travail en matière d'équité, et la précarité du sentiment d'appartenance institutionnelle. Cet article propose une compréhension nuancée de la profession des affaires étudiantes et appelle à des approches plus inclusives, relationnelles, réflexives et critiques en matière de développement professionnel, de politiques institutionnelles et de pérennité de la main-d'œuvre. Il contribue aux discours émergents sur le bien-être des praticiens, la professionnalisation et la transformation systémique dans l'enseignement supérieur.

**Mots clés** : professionnels des affaires étudiantes; diplômanie; identité professionnelle; équité et inclusion

## INTRODUCTION

Student affairs is a critical component of higher education encompassing a wide range of services and programs designed to enhance student development, both academically and personally. In Canada, student affairs typically encompass residence life, academic and career advising, health and wellness services, accessibility services, learning and skill development, experiential learning, orientation and transition, peer mentorship, student clubs and student government, and student leadership development. Increasingly, student affairs is also the administrative home for equity-focused programs and services supporting underserved students including affinity groups and student advocacy.

At the forefront of these services are student affairs professionals (SAPs), responsible for ensuring student needs are met (Ellis, 2010; Hardy Cox & Strange, 2016; McGraw, 2011). Over the past several decades, the demands placed on SAPs have intensified, driven by shifting student demographics, rising mental health concerns, increasing regulatory oversight, and growing institutional opportunities related to student retention, equity, digital transformation, and accountability (Dinise-Halter, 2017; Schreiber et al., 2020; Seifert et al., 2015). These evolving demands have required SAPs to demonstrate a broad and specialized skillset—including intercultural competence, trauma-informed prac-

tice, policy and technical literacy, data-informed decision making, and student development theory—to meet institutional expectations and the diverse needs of their student populations.

In response to these pressures, there has been a marked professionalization of the student affairs field in Canada, characterized by the emergence of graduate-level education programs, the expansion of professional associations (e.g., CACUSS, NASPA), and increasing emphasis on formal credentials as a marker of professional legitimacy (Ardoin et al., 2019; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). This phenomenon aligns with the broader sociological construct of credentialism, which refers to the over-reliance on educational qualifications as indicators of skill, competence, or merit in the labour market (Berg, 1970; Collins, 1979). Credentials, in this context, are formal educational or training certifications that signal an individual's preparedness for a particular professional role (Tomlinson, 2008). While credentialism may enhance professional identity and perceived expertise, it also risks reinforcing gatekeeping practices and privileging formal education over experiential or community-based knowledge (Livingstone, 1999; Wheelahan, 2010). This dynamic is particularly salient in professionalizing fields such as student affairs, where credential requirements may obscure the value of lived experience, relational skills, and culturally grounded knowledge (Brown et al., 2001).

Despite these developments, there is limited research on how SAPs in Canada experience and navigate the pressures of professionalization and credentialism. Particularly absent are critical perspectives that examine whose interests are served by these credentialing processes and how they shape the day-to-day realities, values, and aspirations of practitioners. This research seeks to contribute to these conversations by exploring the lived experiences of some Canadian SAPs.

By centring practitioner narratives and the socio-political conditions shaping their work, this study aims to inform more equitable and responsive strategies for professional development, policy making, and well-being in student affairs and services. It offers critical insights for institutional leaders, educators, and policy stakeholders working to support a dynamic and sustainable student affairs workforce in Canada.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of student affairs in North America has its roots in the foundational student personnel point of view (American Council on Education, 1937), which articulated a commitment to holistic student development and the integration of co-curricular learning within the educational mission of higher education institutions (Nuss, 2003). This philosophical foundation laid the groundwork for professional roles such as deans of students, residence life professionals, and academic advisors, each intended to support students' academic, personal, and social development. While Canadian student affairs has drawn influence from the American model, its evolution has been shaped by distinct institutional, cultural, and political contexts that have produced divergent trajectories in the professionalization of the field.

Hardy Cox and Strange (2010) offer a comparative analysis of the development of student affairs and services in Canada and the United States, highlighting both convergence and enduring divergence. In the United States, the professionalization of student affairs was accelerated by early adoption of national associations (such as NASPA–Student Affairs Administra-

tors in Higher Education and American College Personnel Association), widespread graduate education in college student personnel, and the formalization of student development theories. This ecosystem fostered a cohesive professional identity and standardized pathways into the field. By contrast, Canada's student services emerged in a more incremental and decentralized fashion, often in response to specific institutional needs. The profession developed without a unifying theoretical framework and was shaped by practitioners from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including psychology, counselling, and education. Consequently, Canadian student affairs professionals (SAPs) have historically entered the field through eclectic and often informal routes.

The lack of a singular professional pathway in Canada has produced a field marked by variability in professional preparation, identity formation, and institutional legitimacy. While professional organizations such as the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) have played a role in establishing competency frameworks and communities of practice, their influence is uneven across institutional types and regions. This stands in contrast to the more established and specialized networks in the United States, where professional associations and credentialing pathways have created a strong sense of disciplinary coherence and role specificity (McGill et al., 2021; Seifert & Burrow, 2013).

More recently, the Canadian context has seen a gradual integration of student development theories, particularly those adapted from U.S. models. However, this integration remains partial and contingent upon local institutional mandates, provincial policies, and the diverse needs of student populations. As Hardy Cox and Strange (2010) observe, Canada's multicultural commitments, as well as the provincial jurisdiction over education, further contribute to the fragmentation of practice and the emergence of varied approaches to student support. This complexity is particularly salient in equity-oriented domains such as Indigenous student services, where reconciliation efforts and implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission's calls to action have reshaped institutional priorities (Pidgeon, 2016).

Contemporary SAPs in both Canada and the United States operate in increasingly complex environments defined by intensifying demands and constrained resources. The growing specialization of roles, heightened expectations around service delivery, and increased accountability pressures have redefined the scope of professional practice (Ardoin et al., 2019; Faidley, 2024). It's expected that SAPs will be able to respond to multifaceted student needs, including mental health, accessibility, and equity, while simultaneously navigating institutional restructuring and neo-liberal governance logics that prioritize efficiency, performance metrics, and market-driven models of student success (Harper & Patton, 2007; Kimball et al., 2023). In Canadian institutions, these expectations are further shaped by regional disparities in funding and staffing, resulting in uneven institutional capacities to support students comprehensively.

Burnout and job dissatisfaction are growing concerns across the profession, with implications for staff retention and well-being. Student affairs professionals engaged in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work are particularly vulnerable to burnout, as they frequently bear the additional burden of emotional labour, representation, and advocacy within under-resourced contexts (Anderson, 2021; Rowe-Allen & Smith, 2019). Student affairs roles focused on counselling and advising are also susceptible to burnout due to the costs of compassion fatigue or secondary stress (Perez & Betten-court, 2024). These patterns are consistent with broader findings that link structural inequities and professional attrition in student affairs (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018).

The literature underscores the multifaceted and intersecting challenges faced by SAPs, challenges that span professional preparation, credentialism, evolving institutional demands, and questions of identity and legitimacy. These dynamics are particularly pronounced in the Canadian context, where the profession continues to grapple with its hybrid origins, decentralized structures, and shifting societal expectations. This article contributes to this body of

work by centring the lived experiences and professional reflections of Canadian SAPs through an autoethnographic lens. In doing so, it offers a nuanced account of how SAPs navigate professional identity, institutional belonging, and systemic constraints in a field undergoing continuous transformation.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study employs an integrated theoretical approach drawing from the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and social ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1995; Spencer, 2021) to examine the complex dynamics of professional experiences faced by SAPs.

The JD-R model serves as a foundation for understanding the intricate balance between the demands faced by professionals, such as workload pressures, emotional labour, and organizational expectations, and the resources available, including social support, professional autonomy, and development opportunities. This model highlights how excessive demands coupled with insufficient resources can lead to significant outcomes, such as burnout, disengagement, and attrition (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). By employing the JD-R model, this study seeks to explore the structural and emotional demands faced by SAPs within their professional contexts.

However, given the multifaceted nature of student affairs work, the JD-R model alone may not fully encapsulate the layered and systemic influences impacting SAPs. To address this gap, social ecological systems theory complements the JD-R model by situating SAP experiences within broader environmental contexts, recognizing the significance of multiple interacting layers: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and societal levels. Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1995) ecological model and Spencer's (2021) recent expansions underscore the necessity of viewing SAPs' professional experiences as dynamically influenced by external structures, institutional cultures,

policy decisions, and sociocultural contexts. This ecological perspective emphasizes that SAP well-being and effectiveness are not solely outcomes of individual factors but are deeply shaped by organizational policies, leadership practices, professional culture, systemic inequities, and broader societal expectations.

Integrating these two frameworks provides a holistic lens through which to analyze SAP experiences, effectively addressing multilayered challenges, including resource constraints, credentialism, equity concerns, and systemic barriers. This combined theoretical framework facilitates an understanding of SAPs' lived realities, allowing for nuanced insights and actionable recommendations to support professionals in navigating their evolving roles amidst complex institutional and societal landscapes.

## **PARTICIPANT AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITIES**

As the researchers and participants in this study, we brought unique perspectives to the data and analysis informed by our differing identities and experiences. By utilizing a reflexive approach, we worked both individually and collectively to acknowledge our biases and limitations throughout the research process. We acknowledge that our lived experiences may not reflect the experiences of all SAPs. Below, we each outline our identities to provide context for the perspectives we bring to this article.

### **Cori**

Throughout my 13-year career in student affairs I have worked in various parts of the field including academic advising, learning skill development, student clubs and leadership, orientation and transition, and residence. My professional development has included completing an MEd and PhD in higher education, where I studied inclusion in the undergraduate engineering experience. My SAP practice is student-centred, critical, and research-informed. I strive to lead systemic changes that will create a more inclu-

sive and equitable student experience for underserved students. As a White, straight, able-bodied, cis-woman settler of European descent, with an invisible disability, from an upper middle-class socio-economic background, I am afforded many privileges in my role as an SAP. My Whiteness, socio-economic status, education, gender, heteronormativity, and perceived ability often align with normative perceptions of who an SAP is. I recognize that this is not the same experience my colleagues have in this field of work, and as a researcher I worked to decentre my privileges by acknowledging my biases.

### **Heather**

With over 25 years in student services spanning registrarial and student affairs, I am committed to fostering an inclusive ecosystem of programs, services, and resources that support the diverse needs of students, with particular attention to under-represented and equity-denied communities. Rooted in a critical lens, my work as a scholar-practitioner recognizes how systemic inequities shape student experiences and institutional practices. My academic journey, including a doctorate in education, and research on the impact of academic capitalism on the professional lives of university administrators deepens my understanding of the systemic forces influencing higher education and reinforces my commitment to equity, access, and student success. As a White, cisgender, able-bodied settler, I acknowledge the privilege I hold and strive to continuously interrogate my assumptions and actions. I seek to leverage my position to advocate for equity-denied students while engaging in reciprocal learning with students and colleagues.

### **Katherine**

As a new professional with two years of experience in student affairs, I have primarily worked in residence life. Currently, I serve as a residence life coordinator, supporting residence programming and residence council initiatives. My master's degree in education has deepened my understanding of institutional dynamics, student

development, and transitions, as well as the critical role student affairs professionals play in fostering student success. As a cisgender, heterosexual, East Asian woman with an invisible disability, I hold both privileged and marginalized identities. My privileges align with certain societal norms, while my marginalized identities present unique challenges that shape my perspective. As I reflect on these intersections, I strive to reconcile the coexistence of privilege and marginalization, recognizing that one does not diminish the other. I am committed to fostering inclusive environments, amplifying under-represented voices, and continually growing in my understanding of equity and inclusion in higher education.

### Sania

My eight-year career in student affairs has spanned working in various types of roles, focusing on career services, leadership development, experiential learning, and projects to improve the undergraduate student experience. As a student who was not very involved during my own undergraduate degree, my entry into the field was through my master's degree in education. As I learned more about the field of student affairs, I became interested in understanding the experiences of racialized and Indigenous student affairs professionals in Ontario, noting the under-representation in the field; I also became more involved with CACUSS for a period, serving as co-chair for the CACUSS Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Community of Practice. As my career evolved, my focus has shifted to focusing on scale and impact—thinking about opportunities to break down structural barriers, streamline processes, and enable improvements for as many students as possible. As a cisgender South Asian woman, both immigrant and settler, I recognize that some aspects of my identity afford me privilege, while other aspects can invite challenges. This has shaped my perspectives, values, and approach to my work, and has helped me be more reflective and critical of the ways in which (perceived) identity can significantly impact lived experience and access to opportunities. I remain committed to

integrating anti-oppressive practices and advancing equity and inclusion through my work in higher education.

### Shakeeb

I have been in the higher education/student affairs world since I was a student, starting in 2010 in a casual, work-study position. After graduating in 2014, I explored teaching but decided to stay in higher education, as it made more financial sense at the time. I was drawn to it because of the ability to help students who were experiencing similar things to what I had gone through, I felt relevant and valued. Slowly, I fell in love with the field and decided to dive right in. I continued to work in the field serving numerous communities including graduate students, student athletes, individuals from backgrounds traditionally under-represented at universities, and, of course, those students coming to university straight from high school. I have now worked in programming, advising, and recruitment, with plans to move into leadership. During this journey, I completed my MEd in higher education and am currently working on my PhD in higher education. I am a straight cisgender man. I am an immigrant. I am South Asian. I have two invisible disabilities and like to think I am pretty high-functioning with these. I grew up in an immigrant household, which was lower on the socio-economic scale, but have since established myself as upper middle-class. I have had a fluid navigation of education and life due to this mix of privileges and oppressive factors. I tried to remove my own biases, beliefs, and lived experiences that may skew the research, while still upholding the integrity of my story within the research.

### METHODS

We employed an autoethnography approach informed by narrative inquiry to explore our experiences as student affairs practitioners (SAPs) in Ontario and Alberta higher education contexts. Autoethnography allows researchers to critically examine and reflect upon their personal and professional experiences within broader sociocul-

tural and institutional frameworks (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011). Narrative inquiry complements autoethnography by emphasizing the storytelling aspect, helping researchers contextualize lived experiences and elucidate personal and collective meanings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016).

The participants in this study were members of an interconnected collegial and educational network centred at the University of Toronto. All participants were either currently enrolled or previously studied at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Higher Education. Four participants currently worked at the University of Toronto, and one participant was employed at Mount Royal University before relocating to the University of Toronto just before this study was initiated. Three of the participants have been employed at the University of Toronto for the entirety of their careers.

We acknowledge several methodological limitations inherent to the autoethnographic approach and due to the participants in this study working primarily at one institution. As a result, the personal narratives we used for this study inherently reflect our individual experiences and may not fully represent the broader student affairs professional community in Canada. Our goal with this work is to examine our limited experiences through critical reflection to provide a more nuanced understanding of systemic realities for the profession of student affairs in Canada to consider more broadly.

Data for this study was collected through narrative inquiry and reflective writing. As a research team, we developed open-ended questions that prompted reflection on our career journeys, goals, challenges, and perspectives on changes in higher education that have occurred during our careers. Each author independently responded to the questions through an online form. Data analysis utilized Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, recognized for its flexibility and compatibility with qualitative reflexive methodologies. Initially, each researcher independently coded all narratives. Subsequently, we conducted iterative team discussions to reconcile individual interpretations, identify divergent perspectives,

and consolidate emerging codes into coherent themes. These themes were reflected on, discussed, and refined as a team.

## FINDINGS

Analysis of participant narratives revealed three themes: (1) entry into student affairs: unplanned journeys, (2) evolving demands and tensions, and (3) professional identity, community, and commitment.

### Entry into Student Affairs: Unplanned Journeys

We entered student affairs not through clearly mapped career trajectories, but through moments of mentorship, intuition, and chance. Our reflections revealed a shared pattern of "planned happenstance," where opportunities emerged through informal relationships, rather than strategic career planning. Shakeeb captured this sentiment, noting:

Student affairs is something I fell into. I had no idea that it was an industry, field of work, whatever way people want to classify it. I had been working on campus in several capacities...and I fell in love working with students transitioning into university.

Sania shared a similar sentiment in her reflection:

Initially, I wasn't aware that student affairs was a field...I didn't have a positive experience as a student, and the efforts and services that existed to better support students didn't really reach me.... I stumbled across the field of student affairs and realized that this was a profession that essentially focused on enhancing and supporting student learning.

Cori described that she "didn't immediately set out to be a student affairs professional," but after working in research administration she wanted to move to an area of the university that worked

more closely with students—something she saw great value in. Both Cori and Heather found their way to student affairs through registrarial services. Heather noted she felt her pathway was different than her colleagues:

I did not have experience in [residence] life or student government or club leadership like many aspiring student affairs practitioners. However, education had always played a transformational role in my life, and so when I was seeking employment, a higher education contract seemed like a good fit with my career goals.

Sania and Katherine both had engaged in what Heather identified as more traditional backgrounds for SAPs with their experiences as a student leader and a residence don, respectively. Yet, these experiences did not immediately result in plans to enter the field professionally. As Katherine shared, when she took on her first role in student affairs, she was still planning on applying to medical schools but found a passion for this new field. She credits her manager as her mentor, who “not only wanted me to excel in my current position, but was also genuinely invested in my professional aspirations,” as a key reason why she continues to pursue working in student affairs.

While our pathways into the profession differed, a similarity in our career journeys is having all pursued graduate education in higher education. We all noted this was driven in part by investing in our passion for our work, but also to provide ourselves with better access to leadership opportunities in the field. As Heather observed, “increasingly senior roles require graduate education in higher education, which, like any form of further education, is valuable, in my opinion, but can also limit/constrain the ways of knowing and being in the profession.” As an instructor in a higher education graduate program, Cori also noticed an increase in students pursuing a Master of Education degree immediately after completing an undergraduate degree, with the intention of becoming an SAP. This differed from her experience in graduate

school, where she remembers being one of the students with the least amount of professional experience, having only worked in student affairs for a few years before starting her master’s.

Our stories reflect the influence of relationships and pathways, like campus jobs or graduate programs, that opened doors into the profession. What at first appeared unplanned was often the result of embedded contexts, relational opportunities, and a shared orientation toward service.

## Evolving Demands and Tensions

As we progressed in our roles, the work we associated with purpose and possibility became increasingly defined by intensifying demands, including expanding responsibilities, resource scarcity, and shifting institutional priorities. Our reflections revealed how our positionalities shaped how these evolving demands were felt and absorbed. Heather described the current cultural and socio-political pressures shaping daily practice:

The last few years have been very challenging to navigate as a senior student affairs professional...navigating a pandemic and its after-effects, increase in youth mental illness, affordability crisis, climate emergency, and rising geo-political tensions...the lack of funding for post-secondary institutions in Ontario has also constrained the resources.... Leading in such times has been stressful, especially for middle managers.

Cori, who has more recently taken on a senior leadership role, described similar tension around scaling personalized supports for students with limited “access to tools, funding, and staffing,” further noting that as leaders, “it can be hard to navigate getting buy in on making changes even though everyone is aligned in wanting more equity and inclusivity for students.” These reflections highlight a convergence of global pressures with institutional responsibility, and the growing disconnect between staff needs and leadership mindsets.

As a newer professional, Katherine shared the strain of balancing aspirations with institutional constraints:

I find myself constantly struggling between wanting to implement positive changes and having to navigate the existing political landscape within the institution.... With most [of] my energy going towards my basic job functions, I have limited time to work on projects to improve the student experience.

Her experience reflects a common tension among early-career professionals: sustaining motivation amid bureaucratic fatigue.

Shakeeb's experiences highlighted the emotional and identity-based labour increasing demands in student affairs have placed on him. He decided to transition out of a role he found rewarding because of the increasing emotional demands: "I always encouraged students to balance self-care and academic success, so I decided it was my turn to take care of myself and shift away from advising, which was taking a toll on my overall well-being." He faces intersectional tensions navigating being a racialized SAP with an invisible disability, describing,

it is always a juggling act...I am mindful of just how much I put myself out there, as I don't want to be overly depleted from taking all the responsibility of ALL racialized minorities...keeping my boundaries rigid has been tricky to navigate.

These reflections reveal an accumulation of institutional, emotional, and cognitive demands that has led to practitioner burnout and attrition (Anderson, 2021; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Rowe-Allen & Smith, 2019). This brings a focus on how organizational and policy-level forces, as well as global stressors, filter into everyday professional tensions.

## **Professional Identity, Community, and Commitment**

In our reflections, we found that our professional identities and connections to professional communities continue to evolve and shift. All of us described being more engaged in SAP communities earlier in our careers. Sania, a mid-career SAP, felt more engaged with professional organizations earlier in her career, when her "professional identity felt most pertinent," as these organizations "help with legitimizing a new professional as they seek to establish themselves." As she has transitioned to new roles and navigated the various tensions in the field, she's found herself questioning what student affairs is, and this questioning of the profession makes her "identify less with being a student affairs professional, and [identify as] just an individual who hopes to improve the student experience." Cori also described being more engaged with the SAP community earlier in her career. Both her and Shakeeb mentioned they became less engaged in professional organizations when they started doctoral studies. Cori continues to see the values in SAP organizations and encourages her team members to join at least one for their own professional development, and Shakeeb hopes to reengage and give back to his SAP community with the knowledge he's creating through his research.

Regardless of formal engagement through professional organizations, connections with other student affairs professionals have been an integral part of our career journeys. This relational aspect of the profession and its importance to sustaining a career in the field was emphasized by Katherine's reflection on her professional identity: "Student affairs professionals have a sort of camaraderie with one another... shared joys and challenges that are only able to be deeply understood by another [SAP]."

For us, interactions within colleagues, teams, professional organizations, and institutional culture shaped how we've come to understand ourselves and remain connected to our work. Across these layers, identity and community are what make staying possible, they illustrate how student affairs can be a career

space where values-based alignment creates durable commitment. At the same time, it has also led to questions about what it means to be an SAP and how the profession might continue to evolve. In reflecting together, we recognized that our commitment to student affairs is no longer rooted in an idealized vision of the field; rather, it is shaped by the realities of the work and held together by community, shared values, and the possibility of creating change from within.

## DISCUSSION

### Entry, Credentialism, and the Hidden Curriculum of Student Affairs

Our entry into the field of student affairs often followed unpredictable trajectories, best described by the theory of “planned happenstance” (Mitchell et al., 1999), where career decisions emerge from unplanned opportunities shaped by relationships, values, and contextual moments. These experiences reflect Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory, where life shifts are navigated through support systems, meaning-making, and self-agency. Our reflections point to how broader institutional and social environments shape these moments of chance; in other words, how mentorship, workplace cultures, and graduate education systems impact access to the profession (see Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Spencer, 2021). In that sense, entry into student affairs is not only a story of individual initiative, but also one of context and access, where opportunities depend on how institutions are structured and who is already inside them. Despite the variance in background experiences, our narratives converged around a shared commitment to fostering student success.

This shared orientation toward service, consistent with Lynch and Glass’s (2020) framing of student affairs as a “helping profession,” drew us into work that prioritized student transition, development, and support. However, the lack of a formalized entry reveals student affairs as a “hidden profession” (Taub & McEwen, 2006), often discovered through informal mentorship or supportive relationships (Faidley, 2024). These relationships function as vital supports

by offering encouragement, guidance, and belonging, but they can also reveal inequities in how people find their way into the field. Informal networks help some flourish while others remain on the margins, depending on whether their experiences, backgrounds, or identities are recognized and valued by the institution. These pathways may reflect accessibility in spirit, but they also suggest a form of professional socialization that privileges those with pre-existing access to institutional networks or guidance.

A growing emphasis on professionalization and credentialism further complicates entry and advancement. Though graduate education in higher education or student affairs was pursued by many of us to deepen expertise and access leadership roles, it also emerged as a structural expectation. Formal credentials can provide validation, community, and confidence, yet they also demand significant time, money, and emotional labour. Pursuing advanced education often comes at a personal cost, especially when institutions treat these credentials as gatekeeping tools, rather than opportunities for shared learning. This trend risks erecting new barriers for those unable to access or afford advanced degrees, particularly within a Canadian context, where fewer programmatic options exist compared to the United States. Abbott’s (1988) concept of professional jurisdictions speaks to this duality; while formal education can enhance legitimacy, it can also centralize authority and marginalize diverse knowledge systems.

Moreover, the increasing standardization of professional education risks narrowing the epistemological foundations of the field. Some of our reflections critiqued how graduate curricula—when overly focused on productivity, efficiency, and institutional alignment—may reproduce neo-liberal logics that prioritize institutional goals over relational and equity-centred practice. Our experiences suggest that when professional preparation emphasizes compliance and performance, it can drift away from student-centred and developmental values that define student affairs. Education that reinforces hierarchy and efficiency may overlook the emotional and relational capacities that sustain practitioners and students alike. This signals

the need to re-examine the hidden curriculum of professional education in student affairs, ensuring it reflects inclusive, anti-oppressive, and transformative pedagogies that mirror the field's espoused values.

## Professional Identity, Community, and Institutional Belonging

Professional identity within student affairs emerged in our reflections as dynamic, context-dependent, and relationally constructed. Early in our careers, professional identity offered legitimacy, community, and clarity, often shaped through engagement in professional organizations or peer networks. These communities served as important sources of energy and affirmation, often reminding us why our work mattered and helping us navigate emotionally demanding environments. Having trusted colleagues to share ideas or frustrations with could often mean the difference between resilience and exhaustion. This aligns with Komives and Woodard's (2003) framework that sees professionalization as a mechanism for socialization into shared values and collaborative norms. In this early phase, professional identity functioned as an anchor in navigating institutional complexity and ambiguity.

Overtime, however, our collective reflections showed a loosening of fixed professional identities. The supports that once sustained us, such as mentorship, belonging, and shared identity, sometimes diminished as responsibilities grew, creating new tensions between personal values and institutional expectations. This echoes Wilson et al. (2016), who note that as practitioners gain confidence and institutional understanding, they rely less on external validation and more on their capacity to collaborate across boundaries. Our identities, once tethered tightly to the profession, began to encompass broader roles as institutional change agents, educators, and community advocates. What remains consistent, however, is the need for connection. Identity and well-being are reinforced when colleagues, leaders, and professional networks recognize the emotional demands of the work and offer space for collective care.

Professional organizations, once a key site of belonging, also became a source of ambivalence for some of us. While these organizations can provide vital support and ongoing development, they can also mirror the institutional hierarchies and bureaucracies that many of us seek to reform. Abbott's (1988) critique of professional organizations as both empowering and exclusionary is evident in our experiences—some participants found community and affirmation, while others experienced elitism, "clique-ness," or the reinforcement of dominant cultural norms. The misalignment between stated commitments to equity and the lived experience of marginalization within these organizations suggests a potential need for internal reform if they are to remain relevant to a more diverse professional body.

Institutional belonging, then, may be shaped not only by roles and responsibilities, but also by the ability to see oneself reflected in the values, practices, and power structures of both the institution and the professional community. For marginalized SAPs, this belonging is often conditional or contingent, especially when their identities are rendered hyper-visible or tokenized in service of institutional diversity agendas (Rowe-Allen & Smith, 2019). The SAPs' sense of belonging in Canadian professional organizations and institutions is under-represented in the literature, however, and our reflections indicate that this should be an area of greater focus by scholars in the future to support retention in the profession.

## Expanding Demands and Institutional Constraints

The increasing visibility and relevance of student affairs in Canadian higher education has brought with it expanding responsibilities and intensifying pressures. These include addressing complex student needs, managing growing caseloads, and responding to external crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, rising mental health concerns, affordability challenges, and global instability. Across our reflections, there was a sense of imbalance: expectations and responsibilities have grown faster than the resources and sup-

ports to meet them (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Practitioners are asked to provide individualized, holistic care while navigating policies, data systems, and institutional restructuring. This tension between the scale of the work and the capacity to do it well shapes daily experiences of stress, fulfillment, and endurance. While institutions may rhetorically acknowledge the value of student affairs, this has not always translated into proportional resource allocation.

Our narratives reflect this resource-reality gap. Many of us described taking on multiple roles, or “chimera” responsibilities, a term that captures the diffusion of expertise across advising, programming, administration, and advocacy. The effects of broader economic and policy constraints are felt most acutely at the level of day-to-day student support. This proliferation of duties aligns with Ludeman et al.’s (2020) observation that SAPs are often too encumbered by daily responsibilities to engage in strategic or future-oriented thinking. The consequences include burnout, disillusionment, and a sense of professional stagnation.

Scaling support services to meet growing student needs without increased funding places both frontline and managerial staff under significant strain. As McGraw (2011) notes, middle managers in student affairs are particularly susceptible to stress as they navigate competing demands from institutional leadership and frontline staff. When institutional pressures mount without additional flexibility or trust, there is a risk of demotivation and negatively impacting well-being. Effective leadership and collegial recognition emerged in our reflections as essential buffers that restore meaning and balance. This strain is compounded when staff must repeatedly justify the value of their work, a task that not only detracts from core functions but can also erode morale. This was echoed in our own reflections as a concern for Canadian SAP managers as well.

These challenges are not limited to internal conditions but are shaped by broader socio-political and economic forces. As our reflections indicated, global and local disruptions, ranging from political instability to affordability crises, filter into the institution and manifest as opera-

tional stress. Student affairs professionals, often driven by a desire to improve student experiences, must balance this ethos with structural limitations, a tension that is central to ongoing questions about the sustainability of the profession.

## Equity, Advocacy, and Organizational Change

A central evolution in our professional journeys has been the shift from individual student support to systemic advocacy for institutional equity. Increasingly, our work involves not just helping students navigate existing structures but identifying and dismantling the very barriers that impede their success. This shift reflects both professional growth and changing institutional realities: practitioners are expected to lead conversations about equity and inclusion while still managing traditional student service demands. The result is a dual role of caring for students in the moment and challenging the systems that create inequities in the first place. This aligns with ecological models of higher education (Renn & Smith, 2024), which recognize that student outcomes are shaped by institutional, cultural, and policy-level dynamics.

This dual imperative, meeting immediate needs while pursuing long-term change, creates emotional and cognitive dissonance. Many SAPs find themselves oscillating between bureaucratic expectations and their own commitments to social justice. As Manning (2018) and Rhoads and Liu (2009) note, the alignment of student affairs with neo-liberal reforms can constrain its potential as a transformative force, reducing it to a compliance-oriented service unit. Our reflections captured the emotional cost of this tension, particularly for those doing equity-related work. The constant need to educate others, advocate for marginalized voices, and push for structural change, often without adequate authority or resources, can lead to exhaustion. Yet, for many, this advocacy remains the most meaningful part of the role, the space where purpose and principle converge. These tensions risk marginalizing the field’s original purpose as a site of student development and critical engagement.

The burden of enacting institutional change often falls disproportionately on racialized and marginalized staff. Olson and Ruiz Alvarado (2024) document how racialized SAPs are frequently tasked with leading diversity initiatives, work that, while valuable, is often under-resourced and emotionally taxing. This condition of “cultural taxation” can lead to burnout (Anderson, 2021), especially when institutional leadership fails to acknowledge or redistribute this labour.

If equity is to remain a central commitment of student affairs in Canada, institutions must move beyond symbolic gestures and commit to redistributive change. This includes resource investment, structural reform, and inclusive leadership practices. It also involves a reimagining of SAP roles, not as ancillary to academic functions, but as integral to cultivating environments where all students can thrive. Kezar (2003) and Levy & Polnariiev (2016) advocate for interprofessional collaboration across academic and student service units as a pathway to shared accountability for student success.

Across our narratives, the interplay of personal commitment, organizational capacity, and systemic constraint defines what it means to sustain a career in student affairs today. The balance between what is demanded and what is supported determines not only practitioner well-being but also the profession’s long-term viability. Building environments that acknowledge this balance, invest in staff, and value relational work is central to the continued growth and integrity of the field.

## CONCLUSION

Our collective reflections reveal that the journey through the Canadian student affairs landscape may be shaped by paradox, where unplanned entries coexist with credentialed expectations, professional identity is both affirming and contested, and institutional demands strain the very values that brought us into the field. As scholar-practitioners, we find ourselves negotiating evolving professional roles while remaining anchored in our commitment to student development and equity. These tensions underscore the

need for more inclusive, relational, and critically reflexive frameworks that honour diverse pathways, challenge credentialism without abandoning its merits, and reimagine institutional cultures that support both students and those who serve them. In a time of heightened complexity and shifting expectations, the sustainability of student affairs depends not only on our ability to adapt but also on our collective will to reshape the profession from within.

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