



# SOCIAL CONNECTIONS MATTER: A LOOK INTO NEW STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONAL WELLNESS AND ATTRITION INTENTIONS

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The role of new student affairs professionals is broad, complex, and ever-changing. They serve as mentors, role models, and educators (Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregory, 2005). New student affairs professionals are tasked with the holistic development and growth of students, which requires tireless work both outside and inside the classroom (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Keeling, 2006; Keeling & Dungey, 2004; Waple, 2006). Through interactions aimed at connecting students to their educational pursuits (e.g. programs, events, organizations), new professionals not only impact personal growth and academic motivation but also affect student retention, persistence, and graduation (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Martin & Seifert, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Viaden, 2015).

In the process of meeting the needs of students, new professionals tend to be altruistic and sacrifice their own wellness to meet those needs (Beer et al., 2015; Sackney, Noonan, & Miller, 2000). By putting their students first through programming and services, new professionals may be placing their own wellness and self-care in jeopardy. Wellness is a multifaceted, multidimensional (holistic) approach to optimizing well-being and health that incorporates body, mind, and spirit to increase an individual's capacities (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000; Puig et al., 2012). One of the many aspects that influence wellness is social connections. Social support and connections with others are vital to maintaining a minimum level of wellness and self-care.

Although wellness has been studied in numerous other fields, surprisingly little research on wellness within student affairs, particularly for new professionals, exists. With the concept of wellness in mind, this quantitative study sought to investigate the relationships between wellness and attrition intentions in new student affairs professionals. The following research question guided the study: What relationships exist between wellness and reports of intended attrition among new student affairs professionals? Specifically, this article looks narrowly at the relationship between social connections (designated as "the social self" within this study) and wellness in student affairs professionals.

## RELEVANT LITERATURE

### **New Professionals**

New student affairs professionals are a diverse group of individuals who serve as front-line employees responsible for staffing programs and services (Barham & Winston, 2006; Burkard et al., 2005; Sandeen, 2004). As a result of their role, new professionals face greater demands and job pressures as higher education institutions confront complex and intertwining social issues. Because of their potential effect on students, the retention of

motivated, energetic new professionals is crucial to meeting the needs of students and institutions (Burkard et al., 2005; Keeling, 2006; Keeling & Dungy, 2004; Waple, 2006). As with most professions, the future of student affairs lies with its new professionals (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016). Their development is vital to retain staff and maintain a minimum level of continuity from one generation of professionals to the next generation of professionals (Renn & Hodges, 2007), as well as to meet and address the multitude of emerging student and institutional needs (Davis & Cooper, 2017).

Within the pyramid-like organizational structures at most higher education institutions across the United States, there are a large number of positions near the bottom of organization charts. Student affairs divisions often mirror this structure; thus, new professionals make up almost 20% of all student affairs professionals (Marshall et al., 2016; Tull, Hirt, & Saunders, 2009). At some institutions, up to 50% of student affairs personnel are new professionals (Barham & Winston, 2006). New professionals serve in roles such as student activities coordinator/specialist, program advisor/coordinator, and coordinator for campus activities/programs, all entry-level, front-line positions with direct daily student contact and interactions.

### **Attrition with the student affairs profession**

Even though new professionals serve in important and critical roles, typically they have high attrition rates. Not only do high levels of attrition have consequences for students, but attrition is also costly to the institution, and disrupts the flow of work throughout the institution (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Marshall et al., 2016). Costs and disruptions attributed to attrition are not limited to costs associated with buying out vacation time and the hiring and on-boarding processes, but also includes the loss of institutional knowledge and decreased productivity during staffing shortages (Allen et al., 2010; Davis & Cooper, 2017; Jones & Gates, 2007; Marshall et al., 2016). Additionally, this often forces employees who stay to stretch themselves thinner to keep minimum coverage.

Although estimated new student affairs professional attrition rates appear to have plateaued since the 1990s at a level between 50-70%, there are few new estimates (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006). Research has shifted focus to the causes of attrition rather than levels of attrition. Because of their roles, new professionals often cite the following reasons for leaving the field: emotional burnout (Brewer & Clippard, 2002; Lim et al., 2010), job dissatisfaction (Rothmann & Essenko, 2007), lack of career advancement (Guthrie et al., 2005), inadequate supervision (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Renn & Hodges, 2007), long work hours (Anderson, Guido-DiBrito, & Morrell, 2000; Marshall et al., 2016), onerous “other duties as assigned” (Lee & Helm, 2013), and campus crises situations (Howard-Hamilton, Palmer, Johnson, & Kicklighter, 1998; Sandeen, 2004). These factors not only build up over time; they can also cause lessened job commitment, productivity, and satisfaction leading up to attrition in both the new professional and the colleagues they work with each day (Lim et al., 2010; Tull, 2006; Silver & Jakeman, 2014).

### **Wellness**

As new professionals are tasked with doing more with fewer resources, their levels of job-related stress and burnout increases (Burke, Dye, & Hughey, 2016; Edwards, Van Laar, Easton, & Kinman, 2009). Higher education researchers (see Mark & Smith, 2012; Leininger et al., 2013) have found congruency with national researchers that wellness not only positively affects an individual’s professional and personal lives (e.g. happiness, job satisfaction, exhaustion, and productivity), but can help alleviate many causes of attrition such as stress and burnout (Lawson & Myers, 2011; Lim et al., 2010; Puig et al., 2012; Sangganjanavanich & Balkin, 2013). However, student affairs focused wellness research is very limited, especially in the context of the lives of new student affairs professionals. Although the prevalent view of wellness focuses on physical activity (Burke et al., 2016; Lawson & Myers, 2011), this study used a broader concept of holistic wellness- that includes the concepts of body, mind, and spirit.

*Body*, often thought of physical activity, refers to any movement that results in the expenditure of energy. Nutrition is an additional key component of body-related health and greater wellness. A greater connection to the body can lead to decreased general illness (Leininger et al., 2013), increased energy (Parks & Steelman, 2008), increased job commitment (Eastman, 1996), and increased general happiness (Leininger et al., 2013). Additionally, physical activity promotes greater levels of self-confidence and self-esteem (Blake, Zhou, & Batt, 2013), in addition to positive emotionality and cognitive functioning (Brandon & Loftin, 1991; Wykoff, 1993).

*Mind*, often thought of as mental health, is a state of well-being in which individuals possess the ability to cope with normal life demands and stresses and can work productively both in their personal and work lives. Mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness but rather an equilibrium that allows for the expression and control of emotions in appropriate ways (Galderisi, Heinz, Kastrup, Beezhold, & Sartorius, 2015). Attention to mental health can decrease depression (Beckingham & Watt, 1995), better control expression of emotions (Rothmann & Essenko, 2007; Witmer, 1996), and improve work and personal relationships (Myers et al., 2000).

*Spirit*, or spirituality, refers to the personal practice of beliefs and behaviors of an individual that recognizes people are more than material aspects of body and mind (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Spiritual health allows for greater understanding of purpose in life, demonstrated through their beliefs and behaviors of fitting into larger contexts and existence beyond the material (Myers & Sweeney, 2005; Roscoe, 2009). A key aspect of spiritual health is the connection an individual makes between their self and others, the environment, and the greater universe (Roscoe, 2009).

The incorporation of all three into a broader concept of holistic wellness allows for the inclusion of individual perceptions of wellness that might affect the whole individual rather than one single component. Additionally, holistic wellness allows for the view of wellness on a continuum rather than as a concept that an individual has or lacks. Personal patterns of behavior, belief, and attitude toward wellness represent the largest factor of participation in, and maintenance of a healthy lifestyle (Havice & Williams, 2005; Thornton & Johnson, 2010). Common culture and aligned goals, combined with social and organizational support, are significant reasons why individuals decide to participate (LeCheminat & Merrell, 2012). In other words, if an individual is connected to those around them, they are more likely to participate.

The connection to others, *the social self*, is a key aspect of wellness. How an individual connects with others (e.g., family, friends, colleagues), is crucial to the internal and external motivation to participate in wellness activities (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). Additionally, the social self allows an individual to have the capacity for trust, empathy, respect for self and others, and the acceptance of others without conditions (Myers & Sweeney, 2005). The exploration of the social self, as one determinant of holistic wellness, was a key aspect to the study from the beginning.

## METHODS

The results reported in this article are one piece of a larger study that measured relationships between levels of wellness and new student affairs professionals' intent to leave the profession, *attrition*. To better understand and measure relationships, the study used an online survey to capture new professional behaviors and beliefs. New student affairs professionals, from across the United States, were surveyed to capture a moment in time. An epistemology of objectivism and the theoretical perspective of post-positivism grounded methodological choices. Objectivism "holds that meaning exists apart from the operation of any consciousness" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Post-positivism centers on explanations for regularly observed phenomena in the social world (Crotty, 1998).

### Measure

The study used a three-part survey to collect respondent beliefs and behaviors. The survey measured relationships between wellness and intent to leave the profession; it did not, however, measure causality. Part one contained 14 questions focused on respondent demographics. Questions included open-ended questions (How do you describe your current gender identity?, How many years have you been employed in a student affairs division?), along with drop-down selection questions (What is the highest degree you have earned?, Please indicate all that apply to your current institution). Part two of the study's instrument measured holistic wellness. An extensive review of the literature revealed the Five Factor Wellness Inventory (5F-WEL) best aligned with the purpose of the study. The 5F-WEL uses a global perspective of integrating body, mind, and spirit (Myers et al., 2000). The 5F-WEL measures one higher-order factor (wellness), five second-order factors through 17 third-order factors (dimensions) of wellness, and five context and life satisfaction wellness factors (Myers et al., 2000). Social self, defined as social connections, was measured as one of the five second-order wellness factors. Lastly, part three

of the instrument focused on respondents' intentions to leave the field of student affairs, *attrition*.

### Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases through four national organizations, during the fall 2018 academic semester: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), American College Personnel Association (ACPA), The Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education (NODA), and National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA). The first solicitation phase assisted with capturing new professionals across disciplines and departments. New professionals with membership in NASPA and ACPA were e-mailed by the researcher requesting their participation. A second solicitation phase occurred to reach additional new professionals who hold professional membership only within their primary content area. During the second phase, both NODA and NIRSA agreed to reach out to new professionals on behalf of the researcher.

New student affairs professionals included in the study met the following criteria: employed full-time at an institution of higher education in the United States and employed in a student affairs division for five or fewer years. Respondents must have either worked in a department commonly found within student affairs divisions (e.g., housing, conduct, campus life) or work in a department reporting to a senior student affairs officer. Type of institution was not a qualifier for the study. Additionally, respondents had to meet the following data analysis criteria for inclusion: answer the attrition intention question and have no more than two missing second-order wellness scores. At the end of data collection, 654 individuals responded to the instrument. Of the 654 individuals, 401 meet the above inclusion criteria.

**Characteristics.** A better understanding of respondent personal and work characteristics helps provide context to the results. The study asked for respondents' gender not sex; over half of the respondents indicated female (57.11%,  $n = 229$ ), with 37.7% ( $n = 151$ ) indicating male, and 4.5% ( $n = 18$ ) indicating another gender identification. A majority (63.8%,  $n = 256$ ) of respondents identified as White/Caucasian/European-American, with residual respondents indicating African-American/Black (12.2%,  $n = 49$ ), more than one ethnicity (8.7%,  $n = 35$ ), Hispanic/Latina/Latino (8.2%,  $n = 33$ ), and remaining ethnicities comprising 7.1% ( $n = 28$ ) of respondents. Respondents had an average of 2.92 years of experience, with an average age of 27. A vast majority of respondents (89.0%,  $n = 356$ ) held a master's degree with a majority of those individuals (77.0%,  $n = 274$ ) holding either a higher education or student affairs degree. A quarter (25.9%,  $n = 102$ ) of respondents worked in Residence Life/Dining Services, followed by 21.1% ( $n = 83$ ) in Campus Life. On average, respondents worked 44.41 hours per week with over half (57.4%,  $n = 229$ ) working more than 40 hours a week. Over half of respondents worked at public institutions (61.1%,  $n = 245$ ), at research institutions (56.5%,  $n = 182$ ), and/or at urban institutions (63.8%,  $n = 252$ ). An overwhelming majority (95.3%,  $n = 381$ ) of respondents worked at four-year institutions.

## RESULTS

After data collection, statistical analyses were conducted to determine what, if any, relationships existed between wellness and attrition intentions. Although ANOVA and step-wise multiple regression analyses were conducted, the focus of results presented here is from Pearson coefficient correlations analysis between social self and attrition intentions. Pearson correlation indicated social self held a significant negative relationships with attrition ( $r(397) = -0.121$ ,  $p = .016$ ). Among all areas of wellness under investigation in the study, respondents scored the lowest on social self. With an average social self wellness score of 34.89, respondents scored 42.46 points lower than the national, general population on the social self wellness factor. Such a significantly lower score is of major concern.

We first examined respondent self-reported intentions to leave the field, where 27.2% ( $n = 110$ ) of respondents indicated they were very likely or likely to leave the field in the next three to five years. An additional 27.2% ( $n = 109$ ) of respondents indicated a neutral view of leaving the field in the three to five years, with 45.4% ( $n = 182$ ) of respondents indicating they were either unlikely or very unlikely to leave the field in the three to five years. Further analysis revealed that males expressed a slightly higher intent to leave the field in the next three to five

years compared to their female colleagues.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Despite the fact that the experiences of new student affairs professionals vary from individual to individual, results of the study held a common theme: social self aspects of wellness, specifically social connections with others, impacts attrition intentions. As self-reported social self wellness factors increased, the intent to leave the field decreased. The results hold potential for avenues for intervention to lessen attrition intentions. Although the impact of wellness compared to other known factors for decreasing attrition is unknown, even small decreases in attrition may be of great importance not only to the field of student affairs but also to supervisors of new professionals and national professional organizations.

The results of the study further reinforce that new professionals demonstrate altruistic tendencies and often sacrifice their own wellness, through lessened social connection and support, to serve their students, others, and the institution. This behavior is not sustainable and can lead to a decrease in wellness and heightened levels of attrition intentions. Because social support and connections are vital for maintaining wellness and balance, new professionals should be leaning into support systems to have a positive effect on their sense of well-being. With all of that said, new professionals need to be encouraged to utilize support systems rather than sacrifice them. This encouragement is at the heart of how new professionals, those who supervise them, leaders in the field, and national organizations can help improve new student affairs professional wellness and potentially decrease attrition intentions.

### **Implications**

With the ever-changing landscape and frenetic pace of higher education today, new professionals should be encouraged to utilize those around them to engage in greater wellness. Encouraging new professionals to prioritize the social connection component of wellness, and therefore likely increase their self-care, will not only better equip new professionals to increase their wellness but also potentially decrease attrition intentions. The following implications are intended to create a discourse on how new professionals, supervisors of new professionals, and national organizations can best support and encourage greater wellness through social connections.

First, because new professionals appear to be self-sacrificing their relationships with others, new professionals need to start putting their wellness first through the utilization of those around them, rather than sacrifice connections. Often new professionals are caught up in the hectic, long hours of their roles and leave very little time for themselves. New professionals need to take some personal accountability for their own wellness and acknowledge when they are cutting others out. Having solid social connections can help provide a level of accountability for these behaviors. Social connections do not have to be limited to just family and friends but can include colleagues and students.

Next, it is critical for the supervisor of new student affairs professionals to encourage new professionals to engage in social connections to both create work/life balance and to enhance their personal wellness. Often new professionals do not pose a sufficient level of self-awareness to realize they are sacrificing social connections. Due to their outside perspective, supervisors are in an ideal position to step in and intervene when new professionals are sacrificing their wellness for students and others. Not only can the intervention and encouragement potential lesson attrition and job turnover, but it may also provide several secondary benefits. For the workplace, wellness engagement with colleagues has the potential to promote teamwork and further build relationships with colleagues within the department, division, and across campus.

Lastly, because respondents to the study all held at least one national professional organization membership, professional organizations should also encourage new professionals to engage their social connections in wellness activities. The two main encouragement avenues professional organization possess include purposeful communication and intentional programming. Professional organizations should clearly communicate the importance of wellness, and encourage new professionals to engage with others, both in and outside of the



field, who hold common wellness interests. Such communication can occur online through organization communities, and in person at conferences and programs. Although many professional organizations offer in-person wellness activities at conferences and programs, the offerings should be expanded both in volume and scope to include programming for body, mind, and spirit. Not only do wellness activities at conferences and programs encourage wellness behaviors, the activities can also provide an opportunity for new professionals to connect with each other to expand their network and social connections.

## CONCLUSION

Wellness is a complex, multifaceted concept. Acknowledging the various facets of wellness allows individuals to find what moves them toward greater levels of wellness. Although this study focused only on one component of a much larger study on new student affairs professionals' intent to leave the field and wellness, results demonstrate that new professionals are sacrificing social connections of overall wellness. With a negative relationship between social connection factors of wellness and attrition, new professionals need to be encouraged to connect with those around them to increase their personal wellness and alleviate attrition intentions. As the landscape of higher education continues to shift and change, the role wellness plays in the lives of new professionals may become more important to individuals, students, and institutions.

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