

Demographic and Career Trends of Expatriate Student Affairs Professionals

Patricia Witkowsky¹ & Osasohan Agbonlahor¹

¹ Department of Leadership, Research, and Foundations, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, USA

Correspondence: Patricia Witkowsky, Department of Leadership, Research and Foundations, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, USA. Tel: 719-255-4339. E-mail: pwitkows@uccs.edu

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Abstract

Career opportunities for U.S.-educated student affairs professionals to work outside of the U.S. in student affairs have become increasingly available over the past two decades. The purpose of this study was to determine demographics of U.S.-educated expatriate student affairs professionals and their motivations to work abroad, which remains a unique experience in the landscape of student affairs professional experiences. Using a national recruitment approach of social media, networks, and snowball sampling, 43 self-initiated expatriate student affairs professionals participated in the survey to determine their demographics and motivations to work abroad. Results include the personal and educational backgrounds of respondents as well as information about the institutional types, locations, and level of positions of their work experiences abroad. The results indicate that a desire for a new experience, adventure, and an enhancement of career prospects were the main reasons for student affairs professionals seeking work abroad. Implications for future research and career development support are provided.

Keywords: student affairs professionals, self-initiated expatriates, international staff, internalization of higher education, career development

1. Introduction

Career opportunities for U.S.-educated student affairs professionals to work outside of the U.S. in student affairs have become increasingly available over the past 20 years with the increase of branch campuses and the appreciation for the U.S. model of co-curricular engagement and student support (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2015; Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2018). Projections based on initial research about the experience working abroad in student affairs indicate that these opportunities will continue to expand (Cai & Hall, 2016; Witkowsky, 2020; Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2018) despite the challenges with global movement during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, research focusing on U.S.-educated student affairs professionals abroad only began recently (Cicchetti & Park, 2018; Roberts, 2015; Stensberg et al., 2016; Witkowsky, 2020; Witkowsky et al., 2021), so little is known about this population of professionals, and hence, there is much to explore related to this population of professionals.

Due to the structure of student affairs positions in the U.S., it is uncommon for higher education institutions to guarantee a student affairs educator's administrative position will be held for them while they work abroad. Student affairs do not typically have the same sabbatical processes that are available for faculty members, so a student affairs educator must leave their U.S.-based position entirely to pursue work abroad. Thus, student affairs educators who choose to work abroad are considered self-initiated expatriates (Inkson et al., 1997). Self-initiated expatriates are professionals who pursue work abroad without sponsorship or support from a professional organization, such as an institution of higher education (Inkson et al., 1997).

Establishing baseline demographic and career trends of self-initiated expatriate student affairs professionals helps to better understand their career patterns and purposes for pursuing student affairs work outside of the U.S. and documents career trends for those interested in these opportunities. A better understanding of the expatriate student affairs experience can also contribute to preparing future expatriates to work abroad, as well as learn more about how to utilize their international understanding when seeking to internationalize U.S. higher education institutions upon repatriation. The findings from this study contribute to preparing student affairs preparation program faculty and career professionals to provide career development support to aspiring self-initiated student affairs expatriates. As such, the following research questions guided the study:

- 1) What are the demographic characteristics (gender, race, age, and professional background) of self-initiated expatriate student affairs professionals?
- 2) What types of functional areas and institutional types employ self-initiated expatriate student affairs professionals?
- 3) What are the motivating factors for expatriation of self-initiated expatriate student affairs professionals?

2. Literature Review

Initial understanding of the expatriate career phenomenon in student affairs can be explored beginning with inspiration from the robust field of research related to business expatriates, both assigned (AE) and self-initiated (SIE), and expatriate academics. Specific exploration of SIEs' experiences in their work abroad is first noted in a 1997 publication (Inkson et al., 1997) differentiating an Expatriate Assignment (AE) (expatriate assigned by a company to work abroad) from an Overseas Assignment (now termed self-initiated expatriates). Data on SIEs generally are difficult to grasp (Haslberger & Vaiman, 2013) and the complete absence of it for SIE student affairs professionals demonstrates a clear gap and need for this research. The research about SIEs provides the following definition:

Unlike assigned expatriates, SIEs initiate their move abroad themselves and do not wait to be asked or even prodded; unlike refugees, they are drawn by the opportunities and challenges of an international move and do not flee political strife, violence, or economic squalor; unlike immigrants, they intend to return home sometime in the future and do not arrange to pull up roots for good (Haslberger & Vaiman, 2013, p. 1).

SIEs remain in a “pre-paradigm state of development” (Haslberger & Vaiman, 2013, p. 2) and research about them in a variety of industries continues to grow (Ceric & Crawford, 2016). The expansion of research of SIEs is in even more need when considering SIE U.S.-educated student affairs professionals as this specific term has yet to be applied to this group of professionals, which is growing in numbers and interest (Witkowsky, 2020; Yakoboski & Perozzi, 2018). The SIE experience has been underexplored in the expatriate literature (Haslberger & Vaiman, 2013) and given that U.S.-educated student affairs professionals working abroad are likely to be SIEs as they are not being sent by U.S. institutions to work abroad and then return to their U.S. institution, it follows that little is known about them as well. We must learn about student affairs professionals' work abroad to prepare them for the experience of supporting co-curricular learning as the international higher education landscape expands (Kinser et al., 2010).

2.1 Demographics of Student Affairs Professionals

Who are student affairs professionals in the U.S. and how are they similar to and different from expatriate student affairs professionals? Tracking of student affairs graduate students and professionals' demographics more than 30 years ago demonstrates continued issues present in the lack of representation of diverse identities in the student affairs professional population (Task Force on Professional Preparation and Practice, 1989). At that time, there was an overrepresentation of white, able-bodied women in the student affairs career pipeline (Task Force on Professional Preparation and Practice, 1989).

Continuing more recently, to put the demographics of expatriate student affairs professionals into context, a report sponsored by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) documents an overview of the demographics of student affairs professionals in the U.S. (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). In terms of gender and race, women occupied 71% of student affairs positions with 51% of the women being white (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). 20% of the professionals identify as men, thus meaning 9% identify outside of the gender binary. More broadly, LatinX student affairs professionals account for 8% and Asian student affairs professionals account for 3% (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Student affairs have a young workforce with the median age being 32 years old (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Additionally, 71% of student affairs educators hold entry level titles and provide direct service to students (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Concerns about the lack of diversity in the student affairs profession began in the late 1980s (Task Force on Professional Preparation and Practice, 1989) and continues today as the diversity of student affairs graduate preparation students does not mirror the diversity found in the college student population (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018; Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1991; Talbot, 1996).

2.2 Motivations for Pursuing Work in Student Affairs

The reasons professionals choose a career in student affairs has remained constant since the research began more than 30 years ago. To begin, many professionals in student affairs are initially interested in the field through undergraduate student leadership and employment opportunities, which also frequently connects them with mentors who share about their student affairs career paths (Hunter, 1992; Richmond & Sherman, 1991; Williams et

al., 1990). The main reasons found by Forney (1994) in their research with graduate students in 16 master's degree programs were that they sought out a career in student affairs to work directly to support students' development and they valued the college environment. McEwen and Taub's (2006) study of graduate students' decision to pursue a student affairs career included the following reasons: desire to educate college students, desire to continue to learn and grow through their career, variety of opportunities within student affairs, autonomy in the profession, and desire for a fulfilling career. More recent studies of the decisions to pursue student affairs have not been conducted, but it can be assumed that the reasons remain similar. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has impacted the student affairs profession as professionals seek new opportunities to apply their skills to new settings that offer higher pay and more flexibility in terms of remote work (Ellis, 2021; NASPA 2022).

2.3 Motivations for Pursuing Work Abroad in Higher Education

The studies about the motivations for pursuing work in student affairs discussed above assumed work in student affairs occurs within the U.S. and thus missed the opportunity to explore motivations for pursuing student affairs work abroad, which this study seeks to address. Because of the lack of research focused on expatriate student affairs professionals, we look at the motivations of self-initiated academic expatriates in higher education. These previous studies did not consider the context outside of the U.S. when exploring motivations to work in student affairs.

In studies of motivations of self-initiated academic expatriates, the findings are organized by push and pull factors. The pull factors motivating self-initiated academic expatriates include their desire to experience adventure through cultural immersion, new experiences, and travel opportunities (Cai & Hall, 2016; Froese, 2012; Richardson & Mallon, 2005). Additional factors identified include financial benefits as well as career opportunities, such as upward mobility and the ability to contribute to their profession (Cai & Hall, 2016; Froese, 2012; Richardson & Mallon, 2005). Specifically related to career opportunities at international branch campuses, motivations included the opportunity to innovate and be involved in an exciting professional endeavor (Cai & Hall, 2016). Push factors that study participants considered in their decision to pursue work abroad included their families, both generally and in terms of the location they chose (Cai & Hall, 2016; Froese, 2012; Richardson & Mallon, 2005). Academic expatriates took additional care in considering their families' opportunities when deciding to pursue work abroad. This literature drawing from self-initiated academic expatriates provides a starting point for understanding the motivations for student affairs professionals to work abroad.

3. Method

3.1 Survey Design

The "Global Survey of Demographics and Career Trends of Self-Initiated Expatriate U.S.-Trained Student Affairs Professionals with Work Experience Abroad in Student Affairs" was created by the authors and sent to U.S.-educated student affairs professionals with work experience abroad in student affairs. The target population for this study consisted of all student affairs professionals who received a master's or doctoral degree from a U.S. institution and have at least one expatriate experience in the last 20 years. The global survey consisted of 80 questions separated into four categories: (1) demographic information (race, gender, age, marital status); (2) expatriate experience (functional areas, years of experience, institutional types); (3) motivations (Selmer & Lauring, 2010 adapted from Richardson & Mallon, 2005); and (4) repatriation information.

3.2 Procedure

These survey responses were intended to provide a census of U.S.-educated student affairs professionals with expatriate experience, but ultimately utilized convenience sampling due to the inability to know and connect with all eligible participants. Prior to conducting the study, we conducted a pilot survey of three current U.S.-educated student affairs professionals to evaluate the survey's functionality, language ambiguity, and their satisfaction with the length of time required to complete the survey. Based on their responses, the survey was modified to improve usability and provide question clarity.

The initial call for participants included postings on relevant student affairs professionals Facebook groups and emails to the CSP-listserv, which includes faculty members from U.S. student affairs preparation programs. In addition to the broad posting of the survey opportunity, the call for participants was also sent out via Qualtrics to a list of student affairs professionals collected through previous research and professional networks. When the email address was known, the Qualtrics survey was sent directly to the respondents' email and an anonymous link was also created for those who were referred to the study through the postings and by others. A final approach to obtaining participants included a question in the survey asking respondents to provide contacts information for colleagues who meet the participation criteria. A methodological limitation of this study arose due to the utilization

of convenience sampling and the limited responses for this study. Because most expatriate experiences are self-initiated, it is difficult to know how many people have participated in them. There are no records of those who go abroad to work in these roles, which is the reason this study was conducted.

Following administration of the survey, data validation and cleaning steps were conducted to prepare the data for analysis. Secondly, to specify the countries included in the study, responses to the question “What is your country of origin?” were examined. Respondents were able to fill in any country in the open-ended comment box. The responses were recoded to a dichotomous variable – U.S. citizen and non-U.S. citizen. This process was repeated for the question “What was your primary functional area in Experience 1?” to match existing areas – academic advising, international student advising, residential life, student leadership development and others.

3.3 Variables

This descriptive study categorized variables into six groups: demographic, family responsibilities during student affairs professional experience, prior academic experience, expatriate job characteristics, and institutional variables and variables reflecting respondents’ motivation for working abroad. The variables of interest reflect the respondents’ motivation for working abroad, such as “desire to enhance career prospects”, “desire for an adventure”, “desire to be promoted”. These variables are presented on a five-point likert scale. The individual variables are categorized into five groups: demographic, family responsibilities during student affairs professional experience, prior academic experience, expatriate job characteristics, and institutional variables.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographics of Self-Initiated Expatriate Student Affairs Professionals

In comparison to the 2018 demographics of student affairs professionals in the U.S. (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018), the expatriate student affairs professional demographics largely mirror the representation found broadly in the profession with a few exceptions. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the categorical variables. The initial sample of respondents consisted of 40% men and 60% women, which represents more men than the typical demographics of student affairs professionals (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Thirty percent of the respondents identified as Professionals of Color, which indicates that the racial demographics of self-initiated student affairs professionals is more diverse than the broader student affairs profession (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). The presence of Professionals of Color in the expatriate student affairs professionals’ group is promising for increasing the involvement of students of color from the U.S. in international experiences.

Sixty percent of respondents were single at the time of their expatriation and 81% percent had no dependents. While there is not a typical profile of student affairs professional who chooses to work abroad in terms of demographic characteristics or a systematic tracking of the marital and dependent status of student affairs professionals broadly, there are demographics that may more easily facilitate the opportunity to do so, including a single marital status and the lack of dependents. As found in studies about academic expatriates, family considerations were challenges in the decision to work abroad (Cai & Hall, 2016; Froese, 2012; Richardson & Mallon, 2005). Not having the additional considerations of the experiences of partners and dependents may lead student affairs professionals to pursue expatriate experiences at earlier stages in their professional careers.

As anticipated, because higher education institutions in the U.S. do not support sabbaticals for student affairs professionals, the overwhelming majority (98%) of respondents were self-initiated expatriates. Thirty percent of the SIEs worked in residential life during their time abroad and 28% worked in student leadership development. Akin to the availability of entry level positions in the U.S. (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018), residential life opportunities abroad were most prevalent for early career professionals. Leadership development roles were frequent professional experiences for expatriate student affairs professionals, which demonstrates the values of institutions abroad to develop and promote students’ leadership capacity. 43% of them held entry level positions during the first experience abroad and 30% of them worked for a host country institution. The difference between the U.S. demographics of student affairs professionals and the expatriate demographics is that half of the respondents were in entry-level positions abroad whereas CUPA-HR reported 71% of professionals being on the frontlines of student support in the U.S. (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Thus, opportunities exist for professionals at all levels of the organization abroad, which allows professionals to explore expatriate positions at various times in their student affairs careers.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for demographic variables

Variable		Frequency	Percent
Demographic variables			
Sex	Male	17	39.53
	Female	26	60.47
Race	Professionals of Color	13	30.23
	White	30	69.77
Country of citizenship	United States	39	90.70
	Austria	2	4.65
	Qatar	1	2.33
	Thailand	1	2.33
Responsibilities during first student affairs professionals expatriate experience			
Marital status	Single	26	60.47
	Married	17	39.53
Number of dependents	None	35	81.40
	1 or more	8	18.60
Prior Academic Experience			
Highest degree obtained	Masters	31	72.09
	Doctorate	12	27.91
Expatriate Job Characteristics			
Nature of first experience	Assigned expatriate	1	2.33
	Self-initiated expatriate	42	97.67
Primary functional areas	Academic advising	5	11.90
	International student advising	1	2.38
	Residential life	13	30.95
	Student leadership development	12	28.57
	Others (athletics, facilities management)	11	26.19
Position level in Experience 1	Entry Level	21	50.00
	Mid-level	15	35.71
	Senior level	6	14.29
Institutional Variables			
Institution Type	American University	3	6.98
	Host country university	14	32.56
	Independent institution	4	9.30
	U.S Branch Campus	15	34.88
	Others	7	16.28

Table 2. Country of first expatriate experience

Country	Percent
Antigua	3.03
Austria	6.06
China	3.03
Egypt	3.03
France	6.06
Kuwait	3.03
Luxembourg	3.03
Morocco	3.03
Pakistan	6.06
Qatar	36.36
Switzerland	3.03
United Arab Emirates	21.21
United Kingdom	3.03

Table 3. Reasons for expatriation

Motivations (<i>percent</i>)	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I wanted to see more of the world.	51.5	36.4	3.0	6.1	3.0
I desired an adventure in college.	63.6	24.2	3.0	6.1	3.0
I wanted a new experience.	66.7	21.2	3.0	6.1	3.0
I desired to enhance my career prospects.	42.4	33.3	12.1	9.1	3.0
I wanted to be promoted.	21.2	12.1	27.3	33.3	6.1
I thought it will do my career good.	21.2	45.5	18.2	12.1	3.0
The entire family was involved in the decision to expatriate.	18.2	21.2	27.3	21.2	12.1
We wanted to do what was best for the family.	9.1	24.2	30.3	21.2	15.2
I hoped to save a large amount of money.	9.1	42.4	15.2	18.2	15.2
I needed a well-paying job.	3.0	18.2	24.2	30.3	24.2
I needed to escape my current situation.	9.1	18.2	15.2	30.3	27.3
I was bored of my home country.	9.1	15.2	18.2	36.4	21.2
I wanted something new.	36.4	45.5	9.1	6.1	3.0

4.2 Institutional Contexts Hiring Self-Initiated Student Affairs Professionals

Understanding where expatriate student affairs professionals are employed can assist professionals seeking to work abroad in locating opportunities similar to those of the respondents. Table 1 shows that U.S. branch campuses and host country universities represented the majority of institutions that employed U.S.-educated student affairs professionals, which is unsurprising given the recent growth of IBCs (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2015). Opportunities to work abroad are also available at American Universities abroad and independent institutions. Within the institutions, similar to the U.S., respondents worked in a variety of functional areas including residence life, leadership education, and academic advising. Thus, expatriate student affairs opportunities may appeal to professionals in diverse functional areas.

Table 2 provides a list of the countries to which student affairs professionals expatriated. Approximately two-thirds of respondents first held a position abroad at an institution in the Middle East, specifically Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. These locations have multiple branch campuses (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2015), which corresponds with the institutional type that employs a large portion of expatriate student affairs professionals. When considering the motivations to work abroad highlighted in the next section, the results related to countries where expatriates work, and their motivations align.

4.3 Motivations to Expatriate

Table 3 presents percentages of motivating factors for working abroad. The desire to see more of the world (87%), seeking an adventure in college (86%), desire for a new experience (88%), and enhancement of career prospects (75%) were the top motivating factors for pursuing an expatriate experience in student affairs. The top four motivations for student affairs professionals seeking to work abroad included wanting to see more of the world, a previous desire for an adventure, seeking out a new experience, and for the opportunity to enhance their career prospects. The lowest motivations for student affairs professionals who worked abroad included concerns for their family, financial goals, needing to escape a current situation, and boredom with their home cultural.

The motivations to work in student affairs previously documented in the literature were not inclusive of the motivations to work abroad in student affairs (Forney, 1994; McEwen & Taub, 2006). These previous studies failed to account for the international contexts where student affairs professionals could work. The U.S.-centric approach to literature about the student affairs profession fails to account for the unique experiences of professionals who work abroad. This study's results add seeking international experience and adventure to the reasons for pursuing work in student affairs when considering expatriate opportunities. Earlier studies of professionals' motivations documented graduate students choosing student affairs as a career because of the variety of professional opportunities (McEwen & Taub, 2006), which resonates with the result of this study that showed expatriate student affairs professionals viewing work abroad as a benefit to their career trajectory.

Prior research focusing on SIE student affairs professionals demonstrates the challenging and enriching experiences of expatriate student affairs professionals (Cicchetti & Park, 2018; Roberts, 2015; Stensberg et al., 2016; Witkowsky, 2020; Witkowsky et al., 2021), which survey respondents validated as they viewed the opportunity to develop professionally to enhance their career trajectory as one of their major motivations for

working abroad. SIE student affairs professionals take personal and professional risks to pursue opportunities abroad, but they view those risks as worthwhile in their overall student affairs career.

5. Implications for Research and Practice

While the student affairs profession in the U.S. has a more than century-long history, the experiences of student affairs professionals educated in the U.S. who work in student affairs abroad have only recently been documented in the literature (Cicchetti & Park, 2018; Roberts, 2015; Stensberg et al., 2016; Witkowsky, 2020; Witkowsky et al., 2021). This demographics and motivations study contributes to understanding why self-initiated expatriate student affairs educators seek to work outside of the U.S., who they are in terms of their demographic characteristics, and the types of institutions abroad that typically seek to employ expatriate student affairs professionals. The results of this study determined that there is diversity within the population of self-initiated expatriate student affairs educators, but there are specific demographic groups with a higher representation in work abroad in student affairs than others, which mirror student affairs trends in terms of sex and race (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018), but with opportunities for professionals at different levels (equal split between entry and mid/upper levels positions).

The decision to work abroad in student affairs remains a risky endeavor because of the self-initiated nature of the positions; U.S. institutions are not sponsoring professionals to work abroad nor are they guaranteeing employment at their institution upon repatriation. As a result, self-initiated expatriate student affairs professionals require additional networking and professional development support as they make the decision to pursue work outside of the U.S. Connecting professionals with work abroad motivations most highly represented in the survey, such as wanting to see the world and seeking adventure with positions that could offer these opportunities short-term or as part of their professional roles, could allow professionals the opportunity to have experiences to develop their global skills and bring them back to their U.S.-based roles (Witkowsky et al., 2021).

Akin to the underrepresentation of students of color in study abroad experiences (Institute of International Education, 2021), the same lack of representation of Professionals of Color exists in student affairs expatriate populations. The demographic data of participants illuminated the overrepresentation of white women in expatriate student affairs positions, similar to their overrepresentation in U.S. student affairs positions (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Future research should consider specific exploration of Professionals of Color working abroad in student affairs to understand their unique experiences.

As the first study of its kind, this initial survey provides a baseline of the self-initiated expatriate student affairs professional population in 2020. By employing convenience sampling, portions of the expatriate student affairs professional population have been missed and we recommend one of the major student affairs professional associations develop a systematic way to capture this information through membership demographic data collection. Certainly, these numbers and the opportunities to work abroad may have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, that is speculation at this time and thus a follow up survey would be necessary to understand the changing landscape of expatriate student affairs work. Additional information about the institutions employing expatriate student affairs professionals is necessary in future studies of this kind to better understand the types of institutions offering these opportunities to U.S.-educated student affairs professionals.

Finally, we encourage student affairs professional organizations to provide opportunities for expatriate student affairs professionals to share their experiences working abroad in student affairs to encourage others to seek out the opportunities. The unique challenges of expatriate work can be shared through storytelling and by learning about others' experiences, which will allow future expatriate student affairs professionals can make an informed decision about how an expatriate experience can benefit their personal and professional development.

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