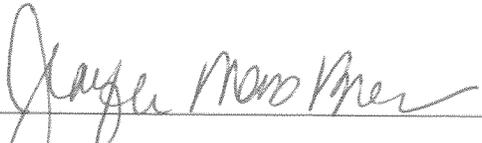
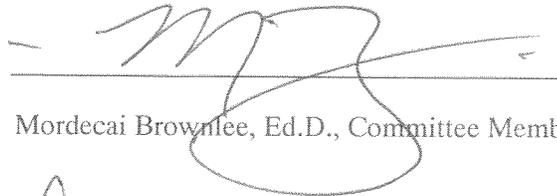




DISSERTATION APPROVED BY

7/1/16  
Date

  
Jennifer Moss Breen, Ph.D., Chair

  
Mordecai Brownlee, Ed.D., Committee Member

  
Jennifer Moss Breen, Ph.D., Program Director

  
Gail M. Jensen, Ph.D., Dean

PERCEPTIONS OF CHIEF STUDENT SERVICES OFFICERS AT SMALL PRIVATE  
INSTITUTIONS REGARDING THE IMPACT PAST EXPERIENCES  
HAVE ON ADDRESSING ENROLLMENT, RETENTION, AND ENGAGEMENT OF  
STUDENTS.

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By  
MARQUIS T. GATEWOOD

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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the Department  
of Interdisciplinary Leadership

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Omaha, NE

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### Abstract

The qualitative study of 13 Chief Student Services Officers (CSSO) at small private institutions sought out how undergraduate and professional experiences assist influenced the decision-making process in the area of enrollment management, student retention and engagement. Insights from this study highlights the importance of making optimal student service hiring decisions. Through the identification of qualified and relatable student services personnel, CSSOs are able to lead their divisions in enrolling, retaining, and engaging a new generation of college students known as Generation Z.

Dedication

This body of work is dedicated to student support services personnel at small private institutions. Your work may not be seen, but it's impact is felt in the lives we change. To my beautiful daughters, Milan, Mali, and Macae, this is proof of a father's love and a hope that your college experiences will be marked by faculty and staff who care about your holistic development and academic success.

### Acknowledgements

I would to thank Dr. Jennifer Moss-Breen and Dr. Mordecai Brownlee for serving as my dissertation committee. Your calm and encouragement was appreciated. To Cohort 13, your friendship and support is why this body of work is complete. To my wife and John, I appreciate your wisdom, guidance, and edits. Lastly, to the Gatewood, Myers, Ekpın, Pinson, and Henry families, your prayers were all I need.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **Statement of the Problem**

Individuals who serve in the division of student affairs at small private institutions face challenging careers. They are responsible for building a successful on-campus experience for the student body and supporting the academic environment. Student services and student engagement are critical to maintain retention and graduation rates. Faced with limited resources, the Chief Student Services Officer (CSSO) must guide their teams to support student success by ensuring their academic, personal and professional goals are obtainable.

In the early years of the student affairs profession, student development had no specific meaning beyond “helping students grow up” (Anchors & Winston, 1993). In the 1970s, student development began to transform into something more than aiding a student’s maturity into adulthood. Faced with growing social turmoil and violence associated with the civil rights movement and Vietnam, student affairs professionals became responsible for guiding students through these tumultuous and confusing events (Miller, 1990), while helping them define their educational experiences.

Student services and engagement continues to play a pivotal role in addressing the needs of the individual and a diverse student body in the context of domestic and foreign events. Faced with managing dual staffing roles and small budgets, student services professionals at small private institutions meet students’ needs with innovation and creativity. The ability to prepare for future incoming freshmen classes continues to be a challenge for professionals working within student services. With limitations of

resources, student services often default to the status quo without questioning if freshman programs speak to the needs of a changing generation.

Student services provide the first impression of an institution. A new generation of students, known as Generation Z (Gen Z), has begun to visit college campuses. Gen Z students have experienced major changes. Their world and approach to education is vastly different from members of Generation X and Y and requires student services to plan ahead to meet their developmental needs. Gen Z students' comfortability with technology required secondary education to embrace the use of online tools and flexibility within the curriculum to keep students focused on obtaining a high school diploma. Gen Z students have been conditioned to embrace learning through tablets and computers over the traditional on-campus, face-to-face classroom structure.

Gen Z, also known as "Gen Next" includes people born between the early 1990s and the early 2000s (Posnick-Goodwin, 2010). Considered by some to be smarter than their predecessors, Gen Z is more self-directed and able to process information quickly (Igel and Urquhart, 2015). Students of this generation cannot imagine a life without a smartphone, the internet, and violence occurring in society's most sacred places. They have never known a world without advancing technology, the September 11 attacks or the latest school shootings.

Technology has made students' world smaller. Access to information is readily available by the tapping of a screen. Students can talk, send text messages, listen to music and search for information on the web without incident (Igel & Urquhart, 2012). However, students today struggle with social interactions and teamwork. For student development at small private institutions, the approach to preparing students inside and

outside the classroom is rooted in developing a student holistically. This includes developing the social, academic, spiritual, physical/mental health, and social justice needs of a well-rounded individual. CSSOs must begin to prepare their professional staffs to reflect on their own personal experiences to find communality between Gen Z students. Even though Gen Z faces different experiences from previous generations, the past and future still share familiar human experiences that can be utilized at small private institutions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study is to understand how personal and professional experiences can successfully enroll, retain, and engage students.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this qualitative study focused on how student services could enhance the on-campus student experience of a new generation of students by supporting enrollment, student retention and engagement efforts.

Gen Z is identified as being independent and lacking the social skills needed to work within a team or accept the leader-follower relationship. These concerns are largely due to the fast-paced advances in technology and how people communicate. The central question which guided this study addressed the previous experiences of CSSOs. How did past personal and professional experiences influence CSSOs decision-making process?

There is a shift from the standard path to success, which undoubtedly influences young adults to attend a four- year institution after high school graduation. Rising cost in higher education, and the collapse of local and state economies has made Gen Z families'

precautious about financing a college education. The following sub-questions supported the central questions. What personal experiences as an undergraduate student did CSSOs use to relate to current student needs, and how did CSSOs' utilize professional work-related experiences to address challenges faced within their current role.

CSSOs of small private institutions have accepted that limited financial and staffing resources are a reality. Even though small-private institutions have marketed themselves as a positive environment to develop as a student and professional. The price tag of a private institutions has remain a concern for Millennials and Gen Z students. Limited resources and the financial investment of small-private institutions has continued to challenge CSSOs. Students who enroll or withdraw directly influences the stability of an institution.

### **Significance of the Study**

The emerging Gen Z students' class is beginning to enter higher education. A college education remains important in today's economy. The median weekly earnings vary significantly by educational attainment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Among all workers age 25 and older, the weekly earnings of those without a high school diploma (\$488) were two-fifths of those with a bachelor's degree or higher (\$1,193) in 2014 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). A college education has an impact on an individual's learning potential.

In recent years, the number of students seeking an education from small private institutions has declined. The National Center for Education Statistics reported a drop from 3 (*year-2004*) to 2.8 (*year-2010*) percent. This may not appear to be much; however, with more students entering two-year community colleges and technical

schools, there is a clear and present danger for small private institutions. If Gen Z students are watching the rising cost of education, it is safe to assume that they may not fully comprehend how a smaller institution can assist them in their professional and personal goals.

The study is important to address how student services can enroll, retain, and engaged at small private institutions regardless of the cost of tuition. By taking a closer look at the characteristics of a new student population, and assessing the current methods of student services and programs, small private institutions can begin to aid in the transition to a traditional, on-campus college experience that relates to the experiences of Gen Z students, while showing the value in small private institutions.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The aim was to use evidence from the findings to establish better hiring practices for the division of student affairs at private colleges and universities to create and develop student services departments that use personal experiences to support an institution's enrollment, retention, and engagement goals for new student populations.

#### **Methodology Overview**

This study used a qualitative method to examine how personal undergraduate and professional experiences are utilized in student services. The methodology used in the research was that of a grounded theory study of CSSOs and how their experiences influenced challenges in the area of student services. Grounded theory research focused on a unified theoretical explanation (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) for a process or an action of the participants (Creswell, 2013). The theory that was sought after addressed how CSSOs

at small-private institutions accomplished enrollment, retention, and student engagement objectives of new-generation students in the absence of financial and staffing resources.

The researcher conducted a series of interviews with Chief Student Services Officers who currently serve at small private institutions. Each CSSO was presented with the same questions that address their educational-professional experiences within student services.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

In order to bring order and clarity to the research, it is important to define the relevant terms throughout the study.

*Chief Student Services Officers:* A senior-level administrator who oversees multiple departments that provided support services for the student body. This may include a Vice President of Student Affairs, a Dean of Student Services, or any position that supervises these departments.

*Student Services:* Non-Academic departments that serve the current student body. These may include, but not limited to Advising, Counseling and Disability Services, Financial Aid, Food Services, Multicultural Centers, Residence Life, Student Activities/Engagement, Student Unions, and Tutorial Services.

*Small Private Institution:* A college or university that is not state-funded and operated, with an undergraduate student population below 5,000.

*Enroll or Enrollment:* The process in which an incoming freshman student completes the required steps to successfully become a student of a college or university and signs up for courses that lead towards an earned 4-year degree.

*Retain or Retention:* The number of freshman students who continue their education into their second or sophomore year at the college or university where they completed their first or freshmen year.

*Generation Z Freshman:* Students born between the mid to late 1990s or early 2000s, who enroll into an undergraduate program with less than 15 course credit hours.

These terms are important to perform the qualitative study, as it provides a narrow view of the issues that CSSOs face at small private institutions.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

In this study, a few delimitations were identified throughout the research. Gen Z students shared characteristics but did not always share the same obstacles and experiences of students who attended traditional large state or private institutions. The data gathered only spoke to the perceptions and situations of those CSSOs working at small private institutions. Thus, the research may not apply to students or employees at larger, state-run university or private institution.

### **Leader's Role and Responsibility in Relation to the Problem**

The incoming Gen Z student class is a leadership problem for student services. Unlike the faculty 10-month contract, student-services personnel work year round. Often, the time to evaluate programs or investigate potential issues can only be addressed through a campus satisfaction survey, without fully processing the data. CSSOs are often a part of an institution's executive leadership team. They are tasked with meeting the needs of the student body, which directly supports retention and graduation rates. Faced with such challenges, CSSOs must find ways to inspire creativity and passion for the environment of small private institutions. Transformational leaders help followers grow

and develop into leaders by responding to individual followers' needs by empowering them and by aligning the objectives and goals of the individual followers, the leader, the group, and the larger organization (Bass & Riggo, 2006). The transformational approach to leadership within small private institutions allows for student service personnel to discover a sense of purpose when meeting the challenges and needs of a shifting student body. The transformational process moves followers to accomplish more than is usually expected of them.

There are three key actions that institutions perform to support the student experience. First, they provide academic stimulation and assistance through providing a challenge in and support for academic performance (Beal & Noel, 1980). Second, institutions present students with the opportunity to focus on personal future building. Lastly, through student participation/interaction with a wide variety of programs and services on campus, they create involvement experiences (Beal & Noel 1980). CSSOs of small private institutions face budget and staffing challenges. However, they cannot allow these challenges to affect the student body. Remove a program, event or service for budgetary reasons, and it could cost the institution a student. Leadership in some definitions is the focus of group processes. The leader, or in this study the CSSO, is at the center of change in how to meet the needs of Gen Z freshmen students. It is the leader's responsibility to figure out the process required to respond to a problem.

### **Summary**

Gen Z freshmen students are an important group that student services should begin to evaluate how current initiatives support their educational success. Faced with budgetary and staffing limitations, the CSSO is responsible for a student's out-of-the-

classroom experiences. The task is difficult as the educational foundations of secondary education, and rising education cost have shaped Gen Z's environment. Small private institutions are not in a place to respond to Gen Z's needs by simply funding a new program or dedicating the time and human capital towards institutional research on how to meet specific student needs. The way CSSOs of small private institutions can address these issues is by drawing from experience and finding ways to respond to Gen Z's needs through current student services and initiatives. Student services are responsible for assuring a campus life environment is engaging enough to attract students to enroll as freshmen and return as a sophomores. CSSOs can answer the enrollment and retention needs by providing transformational leadership to their employees and students. The road ahead is difficult without adequate resources; however, by unifying staff and faculty, CSSOs can create a student experience that address the needs of a new generation.

The study sought to utilize the wisdom and shared experiences of CSSOs to figure out how personal experience can be used to engage Gen Z students in the campus culture. Small private colleges and universities are in a unique position to provide an educational experience that will attract Gen Z students. However, small private colleges and universities do not have the ability to add additional professionals and high-dollar programs to prepare for these students. CSSOs must be able to identify current structures in place that can meet a different freshmen class.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

Individuals currently in high school are known as Generation-Z. Although some consider that Generation-Y expands to the present day, others believe that a new generational cohort, Generation-Z, began in 2000 (Jo, Jones, & Martin, 2007). These students will begin college in two to three years. Secondary education journals like the American Sociological Association and institutional research groups provide insight into the changing characteristics and behaviors of generation classifications. The current research explained the characteristics and influential events of generation classifications, which serve as identifiers of motivators or responses to education, work, and personal wellness.

Research drives student development, faculty involvement and the overall administration of an institution. Each student has a specific set of needs, influenced by gender, culture, social upbringing, and sexual orientation. By understanding the history and theory behind student services, one can identify trends that meet the needs of a new generation of college students. The review of literature for the qualitative research was organized by researching a variation of terms. The first section of the review defined generations and their defining characteristics. Terms used in this section include “Generations”, “Generation Z”, “Generations in Schools”, “Generation Differences”, “Generation Changes”, and “Generation in Education”. The second and third sections addressed the history of student services, student development theory and its impact on retention and student experience. The terms used in the search were “Higher Education and Student Affairs,” “Student Services and Colleges,” “Student Affairs and Retention,”

“Student Services and Graduation Rates,” “Student Leadership in College,” and “Generations and Student Services.”

The review was conducted through digital libraries and scholarly search engines. Journal Storage (JSTOR), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and EBSCO were used to search for current literature that supported the research topic. Generation differences and the history and purpose of student services will assist the study by identifying the future needs of a Gen Z college freshman.

### **Defining the Generations**

In order to understand the demographic of a society, western civilizations have sought various classifications to help address complexities found within human behavior. A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Defining a generation depends on the means in which the researcher limits members of a specified group of individuals.

There are three views on how to define a generation. The first presumes that individuals share an event or influences to define a generation (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999). The second defines generation as a group of people self-consciously defined, by themselves and by others, as part of historically based social movements (Alwin, 2002). Growing up in wartime, living through a natural or financial disaster, or the introduction of a new invention may define a generation and influence their behaviors. While individuals in various generations are diverse, they nevertheless share certain thoughts, values, and behaviors because of those specific events they experienced

(1999). The remaining view relies on the birth year, or a unique position within a family's line of descent.

A person's birth year allows a researcher to bookend a generation. For example, being born in 1980 and before 1999 (Crampton & Hodge, 2006) makes an individual a part of Generation Y, also known as Millennials. Depending on the source, Generation Y may include or exclude a large number of individuals who may or may not fit the shared behaviors of the grouping. Some sources state that Generation Y may include individuals born between 1978 and 1995 (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006), 1980 and 2002 (Kersten, 2002), or 1978 and 1988 (Martin, 2005). The final view in which sociologists define a generation is by one's position within a family. An example of this grouping would be the second generation of Bush presidents (Alwin, 2002) or a third generation of Kennedys to hold a public office.

### **The Traditional Generation**

The Traditional generation is also known as the Veterans, the Silents, the Matures, and the "Greatest" generation. This generation includes individuals born before 1945 (Tolboze, 2008). Events for the Traditionals included the Great Depression and World War II. Growing up with financial hardships and in a world of uncertainty and international threat, members of this generation are described as being conservative and disciplined, having a sense of obligation, and as observing fiscal restraint (Niemiec, 2000). When it comes to work ethic and understanding of leadership, the Traditionals prefer formality and a top down chain of command (Tolboze, 2008; Kersten, 2002). Additional characteristics of this generation are that they are private individuals who believe in hard work and paying one's dues. They have a great deal of respect for

authority, desire social order, and tend to be hoarders. Out of all the generation classifications, they are the most affluent elderly population (Jenkins, 2007). They have a high regard for teamwork, service, and loyalty (2007). The Traditionals would soon experience peacetime after the final world war. As men returned home to the states, society began to focus on education, building prosperity, and raising a family.

### **The Baby Boom Generation**

The U.S. Census Bureau defines the Baby Boom generation (Boomers) as individuals born between 1946 and 1964 (Colby & Ortman, 2014). The name for this generation comes from the number of babies born after wartime. As men returned home from war, they quickly began to marry and raise families. The result was an additional seventeen million babies born during this period (O'Bannon, 2001). Boomers witnessed and partook in the political and social turmoil of their time: the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the assassinations of President Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Nixon's Watergate, the sexual revolution, and Woodstock (Bradford, 1963; Adams, 2000). Currently, the majority of American leaders in politics and public service come from this generation. Boomers understood that respect should be given to those in authority; however, they also witnessed their mistakes. Boomers grew up in an era of prosperity and optimism, and were bolstered by the sense that they are a special generation capable of changing the world (Yang & Guy, 2006). Boomers also equated work with self-worth, contribution and personal fulfillment (2006). By growing up in a time of contrasts, Boomers would approach their careers and activism with extreme focus and dedication. Boomers started the workaholic trend (Glass, 2007; The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006; Zemke, Raines,

& Filipczak, 1999). Like the Traditional generation, Boomers are loyal and understand teamwork, preferring to collaborate as a group to make a decision (1999). Boomers are good at completing tasks without much oversight; however, they require validation of their achievements and accomplishments (1999). Diversity is not an issue for this generation, and most have a healthy optimistic and liberal view of the world (1999). They do not enjoy conflict, and care about their physical wellness, personal growth and gratification (1999). Boomers, like future generations, have a sense of entitlement and excited by the possibility for change (1999). They are technologically challenged and expect authority to maintain order (1999).

### **Generation X**

Individuals who were born between 1968 and 1979 are identified as members of Generation X or “Xers” (Tolbize, 2008). Some studies include individuals who were born between 1963 and 1982. This generation has been referred to the baby bust generation, because of its small size relative to the preceding Boomers generation (2008). Members of this generation are the children of the older Boomers. Their lives were gravely different as the defining events were the financial, familial and societal insecurity of the time. They witnessed their parents laid off from their jobs and the decline of the American global power (2008). The US job market was disappearing as corporations downsized, and for the first time, this generation earned less than their parents (2008).

Xers would see a dramatic switch in the family structure. They grew up in homes where both parents worked or in a single parent household because of high divorce rates, and as such, became latchkey kids forced to fend for themselves (Karp, Fuller, & Sirias,

2002). Cable television became an escape from reality, a babysitter, or educator as this generation became influenced by MTV.

Xers are also the most motivated to achieve a balance between work and life (Jenkins, 2007; Karp, Fuller, & Sirias, 2002), and are more independent, autonomous and self-reliant than the other generations (Jenkins, 2007). They are not concerned with loyalty towards an employer or establishment; rather, they demonstrate strong feelings of loyalty towards their family and friends.

When it comes to education and learning, Xers exhibit continuous learning and skill development (Bova & Kroth, 2001). They demonstrate strong technical skills (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999), results-focused (Crampton & Hodge, 2006), and are “ruled by a sense of accomplishment and the clock” (Joyner, 2000). Xers are comfortable in questioning leadership and authority. They are not intimidated by power or motivated by money, even though the absence of money may cause them to lose motivation (Karp, Fuller, & Sirias, 2002). They enjoy teamwork, are pragmatic, creative, and need work to be fun to remain engaged and fulfilled.

### **Generation Y**

Generation Y, Nexters, Generation WWW, or as most of us know them, Millennials, are individuals born from 1978 to the upper limit of 2002 (Tolbize, 2008). Millennials are the digital generation, whose world has been shaped by parental excesses, computers (Niemiec, 2000), and dramatic technological advances (2008). One of the most common characteristics of this generation is their comfort with technology (Kersten, 2002). Millennials share many of the same characteristics as Xers. They are purported to value teamwork and collective action (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999), and can adapt easily to change. Millennials want flexibility, and tend to be more independent and practice a balanced life. They are the most highly educated

generation, and members are able to multitask (Tolbize, 2008). Members of Generation Y are also known for their confidence, and no other generation comes close to their ability to try new things. They value on-the-job training and real-world experiences, and like the Xers, they are purported to be entrepreneurial and not process-focused.

### **Generation Z**

Considered to be smarter, Generation-Z (Gen Z) are self-directed and able to quickly process information than previous generations (Igel and Urquhart, 2015). Gen Z has enjoyed sweeping societal and technological changes in their lifetime. This generation has had to grow up in a new America, a post-9/11 America, where domestic and foreign terrorist attacks are the new normal. They have enjoyed advances in technology that have provided faster internet connection speeds, smaller and more affordable computers in the form of tablets or phones, and the ability to communicate with the click of a button.

The children of Xers, who came of age during the greatest technological leap in history (Poanick-Goodwin, 2010), members of Gen Z are comfortable living within a digital world. As the most technologically advanced generation yet, many of them are headed for careers that do not even exist today (2010). Gen Z is well educated and likely to benefit from the independence provided by the changes in technology and the technology of tomorrow. They do not spend time outdoors unless an adult organizes the activities for them, and they cannot imagine a life without a cell phone (2010). Like Generation Y, Gen Z displays a distinct lack of social commitment (Alwin, 2002). The goals of individualism and the good life have replaced an earlier generation's involvement in social movements and organizations (2002). They are worried about family financial difficulties, which is a cause for concern year after year. Gen Z students grow up in homes with one or both parents laid off work or struggling to find work that pays the bills. The slowing global economy and foreign wars has made Gen Z less optimistic about the future (2010).

Members of Generation Z feel that they have been shuffled around in society by parents who do not have time for them (Poanick-Goodwin, 2010). They are prone to depression, and have much less of a sense of entitlement than previous generations (2010). With a greater connection to the international community than previous generations, they have an appreciation for culture and unity.

### **The History of Student Services**

The American university was created from a British framework for the sole purpose of preparing wealthy families' offspring to maintain their status in society (Hutto, 2002). The ability to balance the complex interplay between meeting the academic and social needs (2002) is the role of student services. Born from a need to expand the modern college campus and meet the needs of a diverse student body, student services went through a series of changes, which started with faculty assuming many of student support services roles (2002).

The division of Student Affairs is a creation of the American educational system. Early American private colleges, which date back to the founding of Harvard in 1636, were to a large extent patterned on British prototypes (Axtell, 1974). They were private and not accessible to those who were not of high society. The American professional educators' responsibilities were two-fold (Barna, James, & Knefelkamp, 1978). According to Barna, James, and Knefelkamp, higher education was to support two initial needs for the community. First, to educate wealthy male-Caucasian students who were to maintain their families' social status and wealth (1978). The second, to enlighten the student in spiritual and philosophic awareness and understanding (1978). Religion was the foundation of the first American colleges. Faith or religious doctrine was central to the founding, staffing, and curriculum offerings at the colonial colleges (Rudolph, 1990). By and large, the governing boards or trustees, presidents, and staff were in various ways

connected to the clergy (Hutto, 2002). The first academic degreed programs were in the liberal arts, and included courses in the Latin and Greek languages (2002). Upper-class students were groomed and trained to service the public in the areas of law, medicine, and ministry. Voids found within a developing America.

Early American college personnel worked from the *loco parentis* perspective (Hutto, 2002). Consequently, as the students' parents away from home, instructors were intimately involved in the students' activities outside the formal classroom setting (Hutto, 2002). As a part of these earlier colleges' commitment to the student, many instructors found this level of support to be constraining and overly protective. For the next two hundred years, faculty provided both academic instructions as well as social and moral guidance (2002). As institutions began to experience growth, it would become evident that faculty could no longer balance the classroom with a new expectation that required time for faculty research and new academic programs.

In the mid-1860s, two major yet different developments occurred within the American university structure. A decision by the chief administrators at Harvard in 1869 signaled the beginning of an interest in eliminating responsibilities for student social development from the instructors' duties (Boyer, 1987). College presidents were held accountable for acquiring financial resources and bolstering the academic reputations of their institutions (Hutto, 2002). In order to do this, presidents would need a faculty that was committed to applied research and dedicated time to studying at prestigious German universities (2002). Faculty no longer had the time and means to serve the student body in a *loco parentis* role. Their interest and responsibilities connected with students' non-academic affairs became ambiguous or dismissed entirely (2002). Involvement with

faculty played an important role in a student's academic success. If faculty were expected to focus on the classroom, then university administrators would need to find a way to support faculty in their added responsibilities and the needs of students outside the classroom.

Undergraduate programs gained strength and support from a new entity in college: alumni associations (2002) whose charge was to build community among the undergraduates and secure a source of funding and good reputation. By 1900, the work of several different constituencies, including administrators, teachers, staff, and alumni, resulted in compromises that embraced a variety of academic programs (Rudolph, 1990). With a renewed focus on faculty and quality undergraduate academic programs, the on-campus experience began to take shape. The building of dormitories, the establishing of intercollegiate and intramural athletics (Goodchild, Arredondo & Glaser, 1994), and the forming of campus organizations and social fraternities and sororities all gave way to the modern-day colleges and universities.

The first student service positions focused on facility management, accountability, and campus safety and security (Crowley & Williams, 1991). These new staffing positions included the dean of men, the dean of women, the registrar, and possibly a skeletal staff (1991). Personnel had no specific job descriptions or policies in which to guide them to meet the needs of the growing undergraduate population. However, what became clear was that these new university members represented a distinct group from the faculty, whose primary purpose was teaching and, to a lesser extent, scholarly research (Hutto, 2002). New legislation that introduced college campus across the country would require new services to support a diverse student population.

The Morrill Land Grant Act was enacted in 1862, which established the first public colleges (Humphries, 1991). These schools, like the private colleges, served a predominately white population (1991). Almost 30 years later, the Morrill Act of 1890 established 17 Black land grant colleges (1991). Together, the public and land grant colleges would bring education to the common man, and offer degrees in agriculture, technology, and education (1991). The establishment of land grant colleges was seen as ushering in a period of meritocracy in American higher education and characterized by the objective of advancing the intellectual growth of well-prepared students regardless of their socioeconomic class (Hutto, 2002). Both acts would set up the country for life after wartime. Following World War II, colleges adopted practices used by the US Army, such as mental testing and counseling techniques (Hutto, 2002). Student affairs personnel were made responsible for implementing these new procedures along with managing student enrollment, student discipline, health service, and job placement programs (Brubacher & Rudy, 1990). As the US approached the 1960s, the changes within society were equally seen across college campuses. The world and colleges were transitioning as a response to national and international social, political, and economic events (Hutto, 2002). These changes were apparent in two areas: the physical campus environment and the student profile (2002). The image of the typical college student was changing. Junior and community colleges were created to handle the expanded size and number of individuals attending college. The increased numbers were due to the adult learners, ethnic minorities, and first generation students (Richardson & Bender, 1987; Diener, 1986; Deegan & Tillery, 1985), all of which were able to afford their education through the assistance of federally funded financial aid and grants. Armed with a new opportunity to

receive a college education, the new college student was ready to lead the country towards social change, and challenge institutions to expand its services to the student body.

Student activism was widespread, due to the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War (Hutto, 2002). Many of these students came from communities that were segregated or oppressive (2002). Minorities required additional resources and assistance from college campuses to deal with emotional turmoil, separate but not equal secondary education, and how to be an engaged college student (2002). In addition to coping with often overlapping issues related to academics, employment, race, sex, and class (Hutto, 2002), the modern-day student must also work to overcome resignations and resistance.

Throughout the decades, student affairs had to shift and refocus their mission to support a broader higher education community. The philosophic foundation and image of student affairs personnel as being responsible for enforcing rigid controls and discipline on students' social behavior no longer prevails (2002). The common theme in higher education was to fulfill a commitment to develop the whole student. As student affairs became an integral part of the university system by maintaining the *loco parentis* relationship, there became a need for a theoretical model (2002).

### **Student Development Theories**

Individuals like Nevitt Sanford made theoretical constructs to provide coherent insights into college students' development and guide the work of student affairs professionals (Hutto, 2002). Areas like psychosocial development theory, student involvement theory and retention theory (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Evans,

1996, Widick, Parker, & Knefelkamp, 1978) guided student services staff in the support and development of the college student.

### **Psychosocial Development Theory**

Erik Erikson is the primary author of the Psychosocial Development Theory, which studies the impact of a person's social dimensions of personality. By engaging in interdisciplinary research, Erikson created a series of eight linked stages ranging from infancy to adulthood. Each stage has identifying hallmarks: the person's physical stage; the person's encounters with society and the role he or she plays; and the need to order, evaluate, and adapt to the social environment (Hutto, 2002). Erikson's perspective is positive in that he recognized the adaptive capacities of individuals and focused on factors that encourage the emergence of competence, identity, love, and wisdom in an individual's life (Widick, Parker, & Knefelkamp, 1978). Erikson's insights allowed student affairs professionals to focus on developing campus experiences that helped students to engage in community and develop socially. Nevitt Sanford, a psychology professor at Sanford University expanded on Erikson's theory. Sanford argued that behavioral and educational theories should be expanded to meet the specific needs of college students (2002). Through his investigations on the developmental status of entering freshmen, Sanford was able to utilize both qualitative and statistical descriptions on personality and development to shape university policies. Both Erickson and Sanford's research allowed student affairs professionals to understand that a student must be challenged daily in order for development to occur. Sanford's position was that optimum development takes place when there is differentiation and integration as well as

balance of challenge and support (Sanford, 1962; Hutto, 2002). In order to develop the whole student, there must be a balance between challenge and support.

Arthur Chickering would use Nevitt Sanford's framework to identify ways student services personnel could put theory into practice. The value of Chickering's research was that it provided a specificity and coherence missing in earlier educational studies (Hutto, 2002). Chickering's Seven Vectors model identified how a student achieves individualism and personal growth. Movement in any vector could take place at different rates and overlap. Chickering's vectors are developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (2002). Each vector shapes the student to become a healthy individual who is smart, emotionally and physically healthy, and comfortable with his or her human self (2002). Researchers would test Chickering's vectors against gender, ethnic, cultural, sexual orientation, and psychosocial development. Based on the additional research on the vectors, Chickering revised the vectors to allow student services personnel to measure and foster psychosocial development (2002), allowing professionals to better understand a student's intellectual, social, and emotional needs and implement institutional arrangements that promote student retention (Chickering, & Reisser 1993; Hutto, 2002).

### **Student Involvement Theory**

Arthur W. Astin is recognized for formulating the student involvement theory. He explained that an institution's policies should support a student's engagement with the campus community, not limit it. The effectiveness of any educational policy is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (Astin,

1985). Student involvement is defined as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to an academic experience (1985). The student experience includes learning how to study and interact with faculty, administration, and peers. Involvement does not simply mean holding membership in organizations or attending extracurricular activities (Hutto, 2002). A student's participation in the campus community supports Freud's theory, which explained the importance of an individual learning how to invest psychological energy towards objects outside of themselves (2002). Freud would define these objects as family members, friends, a career, and social activities (2002). Astin's student involvement theory mirrored Freud by addressing the same kinds of relationships for the college student.

The student involvement theory placed emphasis on the student's time. Time was the most important resource for the college student (Astin, 1985). Astin stated mere exposure to an educational environment without active participation on the student's part will thwart the learning and developmental process (Astin, 1985; Hutto, 2002). Astin's theory focused on the behavioral responses of a student instead of what the student thinks or feels internally.

Astin's involvement theory is comprised of five postulates. The first stated that involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects, which may be either highly generalized or highly specific (Astin, 1985). The second explained that regardless of its objective, involvement occurs along a continuum (1985). Different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student may exhibit different levels of involvement with different objects at different times (Hutto, 2002). If involvement functions along a continuum, then

withdrawing from school becomes the ultimate form of non-involvement(2002). The third postulate stated that involvement could be measured qualitatively and quantitatively(2002). The fourth postulate says that the quality and quantity of a student's involvement directly impacts the learning and development (2002). The fifth and final postulate confirms that the overall effectiveness of any educational policy or curriculum is directly related to student involvement(2002).

There is a high positive correlation between on-campus housing and satisfaction with faculty, attainment of the bachelor's degree, and willingness to re-enroll in the same institution for advanced study (Astin, 1993). Student service personnel balance a student experience that supports the academic environment. Students who were heavily involved in academics were less likely than average students to show changes in personality and behavior that normally result from college attendance (Hutto, 2002). Students' involvement in academics led to increased satisfaction as a result of recognition and rewards given for demonstrating excellence within their coursework and classroom participation.

Involvement was linked to a student's employment opportunities while at college and the ability to understand how to navigate through financing a college education. A student's chances of graduating from college were significantly influenced by the type and extent of involvement in employment (Astin, 1993). Students needed to spend time on a college campus. Full-time employment or part-time employment off-campus had a negative outcome on student involvement. While different forms of student aid did affect retention, the changing requirements and increasing complexity of the financial aid process resulted in contradictory findings (Hutto, 2002). Scholarships and work-study

programs enhanced student retention (Astin, 1985). Astin would explain later that most forms of federal aid had no direct impact on student development. However, financial aid in the form of scholarship awards for academic excellence, or artistic and athletic ability proved to have a positive effect.

The effects of interactions between student peers proved to have positive benefits to a student's college experience, and led to increased satisfaction (Astin, 1993). This area of student involvement covers areas such as classroom discussions with other students, working on class projects, tutoring their peers, participating in intramurals, student clubs and organizations, and social fraternities and sororities (1993). Among the self-reported changes correlated with student-student interaction were growth in the following areas: leadership abilities, interpersonal skills, cultural awareness, analytical and problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and general knowledge (1993).

Astin (1993) concluded that the effects of counseling had a significant effect on feeling overwhelmed and a substantial negative effect on self-rated emotional health. Student involvement with counseling service included both psychological and career counseling. Both address initial student concerns, fears, and stressors that lead to being overwhelmed and depressed about past, present, and future issues.

The application of Astin's theory of student involvement was put to the test to identify its direct impact on areas like student engagement, success, retention and graduation rates (1993). One of the most inescapable conclusions was that the impact of college is largely determined by the individual's quality of effort and level of involvement in both academic and nonacademic activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This finding had the ability to impact areas of the size of the campus and classes,

residential communities and commuter students, and access to faculty and academic resources. One of the more definitive results from continued research on student involvement came from the tested hypothesis that students living on campus would demonstrate greater freshman year gains than similar students who commuted to college (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Zusman, Inman & Desler, 1993). The research used a large urban university where the majority of students lived off-campus. Students who lived on-campus resided in the same residential facility and used the same study and recreational spaces (Hutto, 2002). By tracking 210 incoming freshmen, the study showed that living on-campus enhanced students' cognitive and intellectual growth. Studies continued to show that minorities and non-minority women would experience increased involvement by living on-campus, as it improved academic success, personal autonomy by breaking family dependence ties, and forming relationships with peers, faculty and administration.

### **Retention and Student Experience**

Retention has the ability to affect both enrollment and graduation rates (Seidman, 2005). Retaining freshmen begins with a student's first encounter with the institution. Although institutions have responded to student retention issues by implementing programs and services, retention rates have not improved (2005). In the United States, 50-56% of college students graduate within six years (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008). Low retention rates not only impact students and institutions that bear the economic burden connected to premature departures, but also the ability of a nation to compete in global economy (Friedman, 2005). For student services administrators at small private institutions, it becomes critical to understand why students withdraw from a

college or university, and how to help overcome barriers that hinder a student's ability to achieve academic and career goals.

### **Measuring Retention**

Current retention formulas usually exclude part-time students, transfer students, and returning students (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008). Furthermore, universities can be somewhat flexible in determining which students can be counted in current retention measures and results can be somewhat inflated (Hagedorn, 2005). Retention specifically measures the number of students who return to the same institution year after year, and the percentage of freshmen that return to the same college or university for a second year. There are multiple ways colleges and universities can evaluate retention. Institutional, system, academic discipline, and retention within a specific course (Hagedorn, 2005) are ways in which retention is measured. When a college or university assesses retention, it is typically referring to institutional retention. Institutional retention is the most widely used method employed by institutions of higher education (Roberts & Styron, 2010).

### **Student Success and Shared Responsibility**

Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practice) was a team of researchers who completed a national study on the importance of building cross-campus collaborations to help with student success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). The research group studied institutions with higher-than-predicted student engagement and graduation rates (2004). Over a span of 2 years, the researchers evaluated small, large, urban, rural, historically black, majority white, commuter and residential, highly selective, and not selective at all institutions (2004). The study proved that the size of the college or

university, its location, or the quality of student had no direct impact on student success. Shared responsibility for student success matters when faculty, staff, and students work together.

Academic advising, social connectedness, involvement and engagement, faculty and staff approachability, and business procedures (Roberts & Styron, 2008) are support services that maintain high satisfaction and retention rates. The Project DEEP team identified five benchmarks of effective educational practices that were shared by the twenty institutions used in the study. The benchmarks of effective educational practices observed were the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student interaction with faculty members, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Schools that continuously found success in enrollment, retention and graduation rates practice campus-wide collaboration. Four conditions stood out that demonstrated a shared sense of responsibility for educational quality and student success (2004). Those conditions were leadership, partnerships between academic and student affairs personnel, student agency, and what the team defined as “the power of one (2004).”

A student’s success is not solely on the shoulders of student affairs or services personnel. Leadership in student success was shared by the colleges and universities identified in Project DEEP. As the first American colleges looked to grow in size and prestige, the undergraduate student was of significant importance to the longevity of the college (Axtell, 1974). At the University of Michigan (UM), an undergraduate experience was created with the help and support of the president, provost, and academic deans (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). This experience was known as the “Michigan Way” of pursuing

academic excellence at the undergraduate level (2004). UM did not neglect the undergraduates of who were identified as the most vulnerable on campus. Project DEEP confirmed UM's commitment to their students through the number of programs that supported service-learning, teamwork, and mentorship.

Student affairs professionals assume primary responsibility for orienting students to the institution and for administering programs and services to meet student academic and social needs outside the classroom (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Once again, drawing from the historical roots of the American college system, DEEP institutions created a partnership between campus administrators and faculty. On campus, a strong sense of respect existed among faculty, academic administrators, and student affairs staff (2004). The faculty understood that their responsibility to the student extended beyond the classroom, and student affairs accepted that student services were an extension of the academic environment.

Student leadership and peer support created buy-in and accountability for student success. At DEEP schools, student behavioral norms evolved toward taking greater responsibility for the experiences they have during college (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). There is a consensus that interactive teaching, as opposed to didactic teaching, improves academic success and promotes the inclusion of learners who might feel like outsiders (Crosling, As-Saber & Rahman, 2008; Bamber & Tett, 2001). Student-centered learning consists of students as playing a more active role in their learning processes (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009). Active learning is often associated with experiential, problem-based and project-based learning, other forms of collaborative learning, and less reliance on the large lecture format (2009). Students who work together in teams for

projects or in leadership positions in clubs and organizations are able to engage in meaningful discovery of learning (Boydell, 1976) and become actively involved in their college experience. The DEEP study would refer to this process as “students teaching students.”-do you have a page number for this direct quotation? At Wofford College in South Carolina, students taught other students through individual tutoring, formal student presentations in seminars, and formal and informal community events (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004), both were academic and social. Students were able to develop holistically through this process and maintained a high level of involvement and gratification.

Lastly, “the Power of One” is defined as shared responsibility for the success, retention and graduation of every student in the DEEP project (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). All institutions in the study employed individuals who informally added a special dimension to the student experience (2004). Encouraging students and colleagues to perform at higher levels energized each member of the university community, which included faculty, staff, and other campus community members. This could include a cafeteria worker who checks in on a student who took a test, or a faculty member who supports a staff member preparing for a student activity. Regardless of their formal role, these individuals make significant contributions to student success, showing the tremendous difference one person can make in the life of a campus (2004). This is the essence of shared responsibility for student success. Collaboration between faculty and staff, with a community approach to meeting enrollment, retention, and graduation goals proves a high level of commitment to student success.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

In an effort to capture how CSSOs at small-private institutions utilized personal and professional experiences in the workplace, the researcher performed a qualitative grounded theory study. Grounded theory research focused on a unified theoretical explanation (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) for a process or an action of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research was found to be the appropriate response to capturing the experiences and views of the participants. As the chief executive of student services, CSSOs have access to significant information and influence on addressing the challenges in enrollment management, retention, and student engagement issues. This study can assist new CSSOs at small-private institutions on ways to prepare for the demand and challenges that they will encounter in a transitioning student body.

### **Research Questions**

The following research question guided the qualitative study that addressed previous experiences of Chief Student Service Officers (CSSOs): have past personal and professional experiences influenced CSSOs decision-making process?

The following sub-questions supported the central question. What personal, undergraduate student experiences prepared CSSOs to understand the current needs of their student body, and which professional work-related experiences were beneficial in addressing challenges faced within their current role?

### **Participants**

The participants in the qualitative study were composed of 13 Chief Student Services Officers (CSSOs) employed at small-private institutions with undergraduate

student populations of 5,000 or less. Participants have held student affairs executive-level positions within the institution's administration, which included vice presidents of Students Affairs, and Deans or Director of Student Services. Institutions were located in the southern region of the United States. CSSOs who participated in the study were recruited through professional student service organizations and personal references from peers who offered recommendations. The researcher met with each participant over the telephone between the end of the fall 2015 semester through the start of the spring 2016 semester.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The researcher conducted semi-structured telephone-interviews to collect the unique experiences and narratives of CSSOs at unnamed small-private institutions in the southern part of the U.S. In an attempt to capture the interdisciplinary experience within student services, the researcher specifically inquired about participants' education and professional histories. Planned, semi-structured interviews occurred during the end and start of the academic semester. Interview data were recorded using a Sony hand-held digital recorder, and transcribed utilizing qualitative transcription software. Saturation was reached after interviewing a total of 13 CSSOs. Demographics of the individuals who participated in the study are available in Chapter 4.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher contacted prospective CSSOs as a Creighton Doctor of Education in Interdisciplinary Leadership Candidate, and not as a student affairs or services peer. Study subjects were able to accept or decline the invitation to participate in the study, and questions were made available before the interview at the individual's request. The

researcher made sure each CSSO understood the background of the Dissertation in Practice, and guaranteed that all identifiable information would not be disclosed within the publishing of the research findings. It was also made clear that participants could terminate the interview at any point. All participants had access to the research solicitation materials.

Each CSSO was presented with an initial set of questions that address personal undergraduate and professional experiences. The following questions were answered during the interview:

Question 1: Explain your undergraduate experience (choosing a university, campus involvement, academics, support system, etc.).

Question 2: Explain your professional (work-related) experiences leading to your current role as a CSSO.

Question 3: During your time as a CSSO or within student services, what challenges and successes did you encounter in enrollment management, student retention and engagement?

Question 4: Please explain how a specific personal or professional experience influenced a decision(s) that addressed an enrollment, retention, or student engagement issue.

Additional probing questions followed to clarify comments and gain great insight into each participant's narrative.

As a qualitative study, the CSSOs who participated in the research were selected based on their location and experience within student services at small-private

institutions. The sample size was more than adequate representation of the population without being repetitive.

The researcher had an awareness of the current environment at small private institutions. Such bias was avoided by making sure the questions presented were reflective without forcing a specific response. The researcher was careful not to make assumptions about the intent behind a CSSO's statement or comment. The assumption leading into the study was the collaboration of student services with other institutional divisions to utilize resources which positively impact enrolling and retaining future students.

The research received an "exempt" approval from the IRB in early October 2015 to begin solicitation of participants in the study. The researcher utilized a number of professional organizations that were focused on student services and affairs regionally and nationally. Participants who were not able to be involved with the study offered personal referrals to assist with a knowledgeable and diverse sample. The interviews were scheduled and started in November 2015. Each interview was designed to cover approximately 30 minutes of pre-questions; however, pre-interviews lasted between 25 minutes and one hour and 30 minutes. The variance of time was a result of the busyness of the participant or how much they were comfortable with sharing due to current political climate of the institution. Saturation was reached by the 13 CSSOs, and the interviews ended in early February 2016.

The researcher audio recorded the interviews and later transcribed each interview by hand via dedoose.com qualitative coding software. The interview recordings were housed within dedoose.com, and password-protected. The researcher and individuals who

were granted access could review the audio and transcriptions. A verified independent party, with no relationship to higher education or the participants assisted with transcriptions and coding.

The data analysis and coding process started in late February 2016. The researcher used an open coding approach to evaluate the data. Both the researcher and a second party without a connection to higher education or the participants, reviewed the CSSO transcriptions to confirm labels of common words and themes identified in the data . The researcher created fourteen codes within the Dedoose qualitative software that would later be used to identify four emerging themes from the data. Each participant was offered a copy of their transcript; however, each declined the proposal. The coding was handled by the researcher and organized in dedoose.com. The software imported and exported the data with specific codes that identified strong qualitative data. Trustworthiness was addressed by removing all identifiers and reviewed by members of the dissertation research committee.

### **Leadership Role**

The researcher searched for common challenges and responses to issues encountered by CSSOs at small-private institutions. Additionally, the researcher searched for solutions to meeting the demands of enrollment management, retention, and student engagement without financial and staffing resources. The researcher utilized their experience within higher education to find a diverse sample that could confirm or refute current research and personally witnessed in student services. CSSOs at small-private institutions were selected as a group that could benefit from the research dealing with

how personal and professional experiences can be used to attract and retain a new generation of college students.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations focused on protecting the identities of the CSSO and the institution. The sample population was encouraged to speak freely about experiences and work environments with full autonomy. Each participant was offered a transcript of the interview to confirm the removal of all identifiers.

### **Summary**

The purpose for this qualitative grounded theory study was to utilize telephone interviews to understand the challenges faced by Chief Student Services Officers and how past experiences support students at small private colleges and universities.

The qualitative study addressed the research question: have past and personal, non-student services experiences influenced CSSOs' decision-making process? The data was evaluated by performing an open analysis of CSSO transcriptions. The researcher will make the research findings available to small-private institutions and other professional groups, that are without additional financial and staff resources, to address challenges faced in enrollment, retention, and student engagement.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND THE EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTION

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study is to understand how Chief Student Services Officers (CSSOs) at small-private institutions utilize personal and professional experiences to find proven solutions to enrollment, retention, and student engagement issues without financial and staffing resources. The study solicited student service professionals in the southern U.S. who held executive level roles within their respected institutions. The study could assist CSSOs in how they approach enrollment, retention, and student engagement issues of a new generation of students who are cautious of financial investment of small-private institutions.

As discussed in Chapter 1, a new generation, known as Generation-Z (Gen Z) will join the student bodies of colleges and universities. Technology has shaped both the individual and educational environments of Gen Z. The size of small-private institutions provide support services and experiences identified in the literature review develop students personally, academically, and professionally. Based upon the data collected as part of this research, personal and professional experience has been used to create small-private institutions where students enroll, retain, and develop through student engagement.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The following chapter presents results from qualitative interviews with CSSOs at small-private institutions in the southern U.S. Completed in narrative form, individuals represented in the study offered diverse personal and professional experiences that are utilized to address enrollment, retention, and student engagement issues. Thirteen Chief

Student Services Officers at small-private colleges and universities (<5,000 students) across the southern U.S. were represented in the study. The qualitative analysis findings of research interview data are presented in this chapter.

### **Methodology Review**

The methodology used in the research was a qualitative grounded theory study. Grounded theory research focused on a unified theoretical explanation (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) for a process or an action of the participants (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Coding software was used in the data analysis of the CSSO interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were loaded into software for coding. The data analysis was handled by the researcher and crossed checked with a second individual who assisted with confirmation of the four themes.

### **Results**

Each CSSO interview revealed common themes that emphasized the influence of student services personnel in enrolling, retaining, and engaging students. The assessment of data revealed four themes: 1.) faculty and staff working as individuals or collectively to support student success, 2.) importance of staff selection and awareness of institutional culture, 3.) value of multiple generational environments, and 4.) relationships and networking. The demographic of the CSSOs were composed of eight males and five females. Four identified as Black, non-Hispanic and six identified as Caucasian. The positions held within the various institutions included ten Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, two Deans of Students, and one who functioned as an Interim Dean of Student Life/ Chaplin. The years of experience as a CSSO varied. Two CSSOs have held the

executive level position for 25-30 years. The majority of the individuals who participated in the study had at least ten years of experience as a CSSO, and three reported less than five years of experience, including one CSSO who was three weeks into their role as CSSO. The sample population represented three Historically Black Colleges and Universities, five Catholic Universities, and five Protestant/ Evangelical Institutions.

When it came to each participant's undergraduate experiences, nine attended small-private institutions, three attended a mid-size public institution, and at least one CSSO went to a mid-size private institution or large public institution. Two participants began their college careers at community colleges and later transferred to traditional four-year institutions. The type of institutions attended by CSSOs also reflected college/university transfers. Lastly, it was interesting to note that not one CSSO aspired initially to work in higher education. Most CSSOs majored in education (Teaching), psychology, sociology, or a religious/ministry-focused discipline.

### **Theme One: Faculty and Staff Working as Individuals or Collectively to Support Student Success**

The first theme identified addressed faculty and staff support of a student's quality of life on and off campus. The commitment to the holistic development of a student and overall success was critical to a positive undergraduate experience. Participants were asked two questions that required reflection on their experiences and how those experiences are utilized in their current role as a CSSO.

Question 1 asked for the participants to explain their undergraduate experiences. As the first question of the interview, CSSOs appeared to enjoy recalling their student experiences, which identified individuals who made a difference in their academic, personal and professional development. Outside of family members, faculty and staff

who went above and beyond their position were credited with preparing participants for a career, or in some cases, changing the trajectory of their lives.

As the researcher, it was encouraging to hear the impact faculty and staff had throughout their college experiences. It was evident that participants were able to clearly identify individuals who left lasting impressions as students and future professionals. Performance in the area of academics seemed to take center stage when CSSO discussed on-campus support systems. In many of the interviews, CSSOs talked about student support services staff and faculty who were unaccepting of a student's poor academic performance. CSSO M discussed an academic issue during the semester where both academic and student affairs worked together to assist them.

“So, I lost my academic scholarship, because I did not know how to handle it. I remember the Dean of Arts and Science sitting me down and saying ok—well there was actually two contacts. One was the Director of Retention Services, a retired colonel in the army. If you go back to the early 90s and you look for who was really doing the work on transition support and helping students navigate in. My school was one of the programs you look at. I mean the guy was phenomenal. He had a program that brought students in, April, May, and June to registrar early, connect early with the institution early, placement testing, register classes, everything. I worked with him. And when I got into trouble academically, he connected me with the Dean, and together they helped me figure out how to reprioritize, get things back in order academically. They gave me a grant for one semester. He said if you make it, you get to keep it. If you do not make it, than you do not get to keep it. And, if you do not make it, you cannot get to keep working for me.”

CSSO M mentioned how the Dean of Arts and Sciences (faculty) and Director of Retention Services (staff) worked together to hold CSSO M accountable for not

maintaining the academic requirements for the scholarship. The university officials took an invested interest in the CSSO's success, and also found a way to offer financial support while working on regaining the academic scholarship.

It is interesting that CSSO M identified the Director of Retention Services as a retired colonel in the army. The literature addressed how universities' adopted the same structures and support systems as the US Army. Following World War II, colleges adopted practices used in the military such as mental testing and counseling techniques (Hutto, 2002). Here we see an individual who served in the military, utilizing an organized regiment to make sure new students were integrated into the university and connected students to the resources that were going to make them stronger students.

CSSO C continued to support Theme One as individuals at the institution took on mentorship roles.

“There was a guy who was not our Chief Student Affairs Officer, but he was one below him. He was very different from me, but we kind of came from the same type of background. He was an African American guy. Big, burly, muscular built. We talk one day. I remember I got in trouble at school for visitation. I had a girl in my room past curfew. I had to go see him. We just kind of got a relationship going. He kind of became a mentor for me. Another guy, in university ministry, I had a lot of theological questions about everything. He was also a faculty member, but I never had him for a class. But those two guys really started pouring in to me and mentoring me. Whether they knew it or not. I started spending a lot of time with them.”

CSSO C shared their challenges as a college student. They were not strong academically and lacked support from home. Like many of the other participants, CSSO C articulated the importance of faculty or staff mentors and the impact they have on

student success. CSSO P would continue to support Theme One as they offered a narrative about journeying with students through difficult life-events.

“Specifically this week, I had young woman, came in earlier in the week who came to withdraw. All I have to do is sign the paper, and actually, I do not even have to sign the paper. I just like to meet with the student to sign the paper face-to-face, to find out what it is they have to go home. You know she was very embarrassed, but she did admit to me that she was pregnant. I told her, well congratulations, you know, you may not see that right now, but children are always a blessings. But there is no reason why you have to stop your education. And she said well I can’t stay, I need to go home to be with my family. And in her panic, she did not even consider that she could go online. I said, well you can go home. Take the classes online and continue your education. And then if you want to come back you know, you have that. You do not have to drop out. And she said, “That is an option for me?” I said absolutely! So I made some calls and we got her online program, and she is fine. If I had not taken the time, because I am very, very busy. Had I not taken the time, that young woman's life could have gone in a different direction.”

CSSO P provided a different perspective to the student who was about to become a parent. The CSSO celebrated the news of future motherhood, and empowered the student by providing additional services that would allow her to continue her studies. The literature defines these relationships as *loco parentis*, which would be used in a theoretical model (Hutto, 2002). Faculty and staff assume the role of parent and family while the student is away at college.

The importance of faculty and staff working on behalf of the student is to provide the opportunities necessary to be successful members of society and within a profession. CSSO M provided insight on how their past experiences influenced their day-to-day role in student services. The CSSO talked about a young male student with a troubled past,

who they attempted to mentor while working in student services. The CSSO shared about not always knowing if or when one has made a difference in a student's life. In CSSO M's case, a mother of a student called him a few years later after they left the institution.

“It is vocation that is reinforced by the experiences of knowing that I took a chance to helping a kid, and (inaudible) you get the phone call every now and then, I think it was my third year. I got a call from a mother of a student who I put my neck out way far for on my last campus. She said, “Right after you left, his father died”. He had been sick for some time. But, he would always talk about the time he spent working for me and it kept him focused and he graduated and now he is doing all these things. This would have been a student where if we did not intervene, he would have gone to jail. Without any question in my mind. Those were the experiences; I would say 90-percent of the time that absolutely effects how I think about the student who is sitting across from me. I do not care what the case is; I want to know what got you there. As you look back, what are you thinking? It is not just that we are going to slap a fine on you. I feel that I might be the point in your life where if I am straight up with you. If I am real with you that might alter the trajectory of your life's course. That one-one millionth of a degree that makes all of the difference five years for now. And, if I am real but supportive, if I am direct but encouraging, that might be the only time that, that happens before you are out into the real world, and you have a job and a mortgage, and family, and kids depending on you. I have to take that chance. I have to take that opportunity, because I do not want to read about you five years from now. Unless I am reading about you in some (inaudible). I think this is influenced by eight years of (religious) education.”

CSSO M addressed the importance of having individuals who demonstrated a caring nature for students they encountered. Individuals who saw beyond an academic challenge or disciplinary infraction, discovered how to assist the student with overcoming

the challenges that led to poor performance or negative behavior. The interviews identified how instrumental faculty and staff support of student success was in the area of retention and engagement. It is important to note how the CSSOs' undergraduate experience with dedicated faculty and staff, influenced their approach to student success. Not only were they able to recall specific undergraduate moments, but discuss how those experiences materialized within their leadership with student service.

### **Theme Two: Importance of Staff Selection and Awareness of Institutional Culture**

The second theme addressed the importance of staff selection and awareness of institutional culture. The CSSOs' response about the importance of having faculty and staff who are concerned about student success led the research towards the importance of having staff who accepted the institution's culture and challenges. Participants explained the difficulty of staffing and financial issues encountered at small-private institutions. Each participant expressed the realities that CSSOs faced when budgets were limited and divisions were understaffed. The CSSOs shared professional experiences that identified the importance of hiring individuals who are confident, competent and passionate about the student body populations in which they serve at small-private institutions.

Immediately, the researcher noticed the gratitude and frustration associated with staff serving diverse student body populations. There were also comments about budgetary constraints and working within those limitations to develop a positive on-campus experience. It was apparent this it is extremely difficult to manage; however, there was a sense of pride when CSSOs tackled challenges without the aid of resources.

CSSO D jokingly shared their philosophy with dealing with financial challenges within student services.

“...Having a wonderful staff. You know what, they use to say, you know, that they may have a Mercedes taste or idea. You know what, we can do that same thing with a Chevrolet price. We want to drink something. We can't have champagne on a Kool-Aid budget, but we can have some sparkling grape juice and folks won't know the difference.”

CSSO D's comment about accepting “sparkling grape juice” over “champagne” captured a commitment to student success in spite of budgetary limitations. The CSSO who understood the culture of the small-private institution did not allow resource challenges to negatively influence a student's on-campus experience. It is safe to assume that CSSO D's comment about not noticing the different was not related to “pulling the wool” over the student body's eyes, but more about students noticing the staff's positive approach when finding cost-effective solutions. CSSO D's was also one of our older, experienced participants. As an individual who grew up poor, CSSO D would reflect on their personal upbringing with limited resources and how their upbringing allows them to be resourceful or creative when providing an engaging campus experience.

Theme two identified that by hiring the “right” individuals allowed student services to accomplish goals in enrolling, retaining, and student engagement. Even though small-institutions lacked financial stability, the smaller campus communities created room to draw equality from areas like relationship building and one-on-one attention. Both CSSO I and J shared insight into having employees who were available and accessible to students. CSSO I discussed the challenges of their student body and engaging students.

“I believe strongly in the ministry of presence. And that was as Chaplain and Dean. And what I mean by that is being in those places where students are. They have the opportunity to engage with you, in their spaces and places. And in their comfort zones, where you can hear their voices. And they are comfortable in sharing those voices. And so you know what is going on in their lives. And you can reach them before they fall through the cracks. Understanding that we are an HBCU, that many of our students come to us as First Generation colleges students. With many low income, inner city schools, who are developing their skills. That is not to say we do not have those from upper middle class families, who are outstanding. But even there you have students who, we all go through our own stuff. And they are not going to always come to your office, so we need to be where they are. To meet them in their spaces, and places. So you can reach them, and help them, and encourage them. Those would be some of the success.”

CSSO J referred to their undergraduate experience while sharing how a faculty member went above and beyond to establish a relationship that assisted him throughout his college career and beyond.

“Even though I did not have my parents or people really close to me to lean on. The one thing I really appreciated about (the small-private institution), really at that time, was when we came in as freshmen. When we came in as freshmen or first-year students, they had different professors who would adopt about five to seven students that they would just check on. (Dr. P), who was a theology professor here, and a matter of fact he was kind of my adopted dad. I could go to his house once or twice a semester. He would check in on me throughout the year. Matter of fact, that relationship has gone on for years. (Dr. P) is actually over a school, and has asked me to teach for him over in Hawaii. So that relationship has remain 18, 20 years since I graduated. So, it really helped build relationship and foundation that has lasted a lifetime.”

Having faculty and staff who were not afraid to engage students was a shared experience by many of the participants. Not one CSSO talked about facilities like student unions or recreational centers when asked about their undergraduate experiences. Outside of making sure facilities met the needs of the student body, it was relationships developed between university personnel and student that appeared to be the most critical to student support. Shared and relatable experiences in student services personnel would be sought after in building a quality professional team. CSSO H shared about finding individuals who are passionate about working at a small-private institution.

“I think first and foremost it comes from being authentic in who you are, right? And it depends on the environment. Here at our university, when I am hiring staff, I try to be transparent when talking with them about the challenges they are going to face with our students. With the limited resources, we have. You know, we do not have money for systems, and huge programs and all that kind of stuff. And so, it is about finding people who really care passionately about educational opportunities. And so having to be just opened about that, and just trying to encourage my staff to stay motivated through it. And to always remind them of why they choose this line of work. Because you could be housing director anywhere. But you choose to do it for a reason, and so when we are in a moment of crisis, it is hard to remember that.”

The “passion” that CSSO H mentioned having for such a difficult environment was highlighted in CSSO F’s response to Question 3, which asked for participants to talk about the challenges and successes encountered. CSSO F talked about the challenges experienced at historically black colleges and universities(HBCU).

“The opposite went on at the historically black colleges and universities. The challenges were enormous. There was not enough money. There was never

enough personnel to go around. People were doing three and four jobs. When you got hired, you got hired to be an assistant football coach, work in the residence halls, and maybe even a couple of other things. And so it was, very challenging, in terms of what was going on.”

HBCUs seemed to be the most familiar with financial hardships. However, the student populations in which CSSOs served not only needed a good education, but also dedicated staff who would fight hard to create an on-campus experience that would make them successful personally and professionally. Many of the CSSOs were transparent about the frustrations of the small-private institution. It was in this place of frustration where CSSOs seemed to own their institution’s challenges. The research made note that the passion and frustration experienced, mirrored a non-profit organization or religious-based ministry. Most small-private environments were not ideal; however, the work performed made a difference in the lives of students and thus worth the challenge. Hiring individuals who wanted to serve students and accept the limitations at small-private institutions were often the reason behind many of their successes within student services.

Individuals who sought employment at small-private institutions had to understand the institutional environment and needs of its student body. Frustrations with limited financial resources and over-worked staff is a reality. However, for those individuals who understood how to work in such environments, they found a sense of purpose and passion in the work. By hiring quality individuals who are prepared for the challenge, proved to be successful in how staff marketed the institution and kept students enrolled and engaged within the campus community.

**Theme Three: Value of Multiple Generational Environments**

The third theme addressed the impact of generational classifications found within a community of learners. The value of a multi-generational environment was important to student engagement and retention. CSSOs shared personal stories of influential faculty and staff who provided wisdom and perspective to students. The CSSOs shared how historical events shaped faculty and staff and how they used their experiences to develop students.

The research study initially sought out to find how past personal and professional experiences were utilized in enrollment, retention and engagement of students. Higher education created environments where students could learn from peers, faculty, and staff experiences. This theme was best captured by CSSO F who talked about a faculty member who had a tremendous impact on their student experience and career.

“This is a little black school in the south, and he was one of those old professors who would come in with a shirt and a tie. Shoes shined, just a classy kind of guy. And he would say, we have not heard from (me). We cannot leave unless we have heard from (me). And that was every class. I went to his office after class one day, and I said Doc, why do you always do that to me? And he said, you are going to be great one day. He said, and I am not going to let you off the hook now. And he kept pushing me. That was the reason why I went to him. Because he never lied to me. You see, when you get older, and have more experience. You can look at kids, and see something they do not see. You can look at them, and see, you are going to do this. And they are going to be like what? You say yeah, you are going to be or going to do this. And it ends up that I am correct. And he did the same thing to me. That is the reason I went to him. I trust him.”

CSSO F trusted the faculty member and respected his experiences and commitment to a student's success. Based on the information gathered from CSSO F, the influential faculty member was from the Traditional Generation. The literature defines the Traditional Generation as growing up with financial hardships and in a world of uncertainty (Niemic, 2000). Members of this generation are known for being conservative and disciplined, with a sense of obligation (2000). It was clear that CSSO F experienced the sense of obligation from the professor who wanted to make sure the CSSO saw their potential and greatness.

CSSO F connected the importance of having an academic community where students engaged across generation classifications. CSSO F talked about mentorship and how wisdom could be used to change more than just the individual student's life.

"I was at a (large public institution), I had 3 young men that I mentored. I recruited them and I mentored them through their university experience. And they were very thankful. One went on to be a medical doctor. One went on to get their MBA. And the other one went on to be a lawyer. They had 3 younger brothers. All 3 of them brought their younger brothers to my office. And said to them point blank, "You do what this man tells you to do, and you will be successful and you will graduate from the university". That said it all. That said it all. And I said, now I know that I am in the right business. They brought their younger brothers to me. Sat them down, and said "You do what this man says and you will be successful, because he got all of us out of here". "And if you do what he says, he will get you out of here as well". And that did it. That did it. I think the reason why this is so important—when you are young, you cannot figure it out. You may be able to figure out certain things, but you are not going to be able to figure out everything. You are going to get stuck where I got stuck similarly as an undergraduate. You need someone older, experienced, and wiser to sit down with you, and help you negotiate and guide you

through these processes. Because they can get you through these hiccups and bumps, and the hills and the mountains. You know if you have never had a mountain top experience, you do not know how to get to the mountain top. But, if someone comes back. And leads you to the mountain top. Then you can have the mountain top experiences. I think that is what is so important. You got to have someone in your corner that is fighting for you. That when something goes wrong, you go to the neutral corner. And in your corner is someone who can patch up your cuts, your bruises, and your ego, and your confidence. And then push you back out there to go for the next round. That is what you need. That is what you need.”

CSSO F emulated the relationship shared between faculty and student. By finding a trusting relationship on campus, CSSO F was not only able to achieve success academically, but also in major decisions of life. Each generation of student can learn from the other. As the CSSOs reflected on their undergraduate experiences, they did not realize they were confirming the importance of having older individuals who utilized their own personal experiences to holistically develop students. CSSO Z talked about having teachers who had gone through the Civil Rights Movement, and how the small-private institution allowed students to have access to these individuals.

“Because we knew that, all of these teachers of what we need to be successful, and our professors had already gone through the Civil Rights Movement and they were teaching us the art of survival. So we had all types of on-campus support mechanisms in place that would help us. We had a career center; you could go in and meet with your academic advisor at random. That is what you get when you are in a small setting that is a benefit. That your advisor, professor would have office hours that were conducive to meeting the needs of those students any given time.”

Having the right staff at small-private institutions is making sure that diversity extends to generational diversity. CSSO Z recalled learning from professors who taught both a discipline and how to survive in the “real world.” The ability to learn from various generational classifications may ultimately solve the challenges faced by the new generation of college students. Known as Generation Z, the literature states that individuals within this group are less optimistic about the future, which is due to the slowing of the global economy and foreign wars during their lifetime (Goodwin, 2010). Faculty, like CSSO Z talked about, could provide a sense of hope, by relating to the challenges they too faced when they were their student’s age.

CSSO A had a humorous response to having a “dorm mother” in the residence hall. The comment seems to identify that student services seemed to understand that youth or younger students need to have connections to other generations.

“Our dorm mother who was, as I like to say older than dirt. But, she had been at (the mid-size public university) for many, many years. And she knew anybody, and everything about everybody. So, you know, to her, I think I had a connection with that generation, and maybe to the generations that were there before me, because she would bring these people in, and we would hear from them. Talk to them, and learn from them. And the other thing that I would say, is it was a time that was structure in our lives.”

CSSO A was able to drive home the message that there is something within a college student that appeared to be searching for wisdom and mentorship from individuals who have been where one has been. The participants shared personal experiences that provided insight into the importance of engaging students with faculty and staff who utilized their roles on campus to help students handle the unique challenges of a generation.

**Theme Four: Relationships and Networking**

The final theme identified the importance of relationship building and networking on a college campus. Relationship and networking connects students, faculty, and staff together by showing how partnerships lead to success on and off campus. CSSOs showed how small-private institutions created opportunities to continue their education or find a career path. CSSOs shared their student leadership experiences that formed relationships and network connections. The relationships built through the CSSOs undergraduate experiences provided opportunities within a career or continued education. CSSO J did not intend on working in student services, however a personal situation would allow the participant to reconnect with a student services staff member.

“And I was at youth camps doing a lot of preaching. I would go out and preach at youth camps and stuff like that. And the coach that I had played for here, his name is (Coach M), who is the athletic director of the school. He called me, and said man we have a job opening and we think it might fit you. You know you would be over spiritual life for the students, you would be over student life for the students. Student activities, housing. And he kind of just explained the job to me, and I felt comfortable with about 60 percent of the job, the other 40 percent, which is, I did not know. I do not know all the department of education laws, and certain things that were necessary. So I kind of just explained that in my interview process. And, they were comfortable with me.”

CSSO J's undergraduate experience created a network of career opportunities. Even though it was not an initial career path that was being considered, CSSO F's relationship with a trusted faculty member put the participant on track to a career in student services. The relationship established earlier in their college career would allow them to reach out when faced with a major decision.

“I had a couple of choices, and this is where my most difficult professor brought my most—let us just say the person who was in my corner. This is where he really came into play, and helped me to make a very difficult decision. I was finishing up my undergrad, and I had an opportunity to go in the army, be an FBI agent, or go on to graduate school. And to play professional basketball in Germany. So, I had a couple of options there. And, I did not know exactly what to do. So what I did was call on my most difficult professor, and I remembered distinctly what happened. I went to his office and said I need to talk to you. He said ok. And, we took a walk outside and sat on a bench. I told him what I was facing. He told me, I cannot see you locking up people. I cannot see that. But, I can see you working with kids, helping kids be successful with their college career. And I said ok, and I went on to graduate school. So that is how I got to graduate school.”

The ability to connect with a professor was the guidance needed to put CSSO F on the correct career path. Later on in CSSO F’s career, a former classmate called on their experience and trust to serve as a vice president of Student Affairs. Where relationship was used to assist in a decision, networking would be used to secure employment.

“I was finishing up a vice presidency at another college. The guy that is the president here, we went to the college together. So we were friends. So we were students together. In undergrad and graduate. So we had spent some time together, and, I connected to him. I was getting ready to go back to (my hometown), and I connected with him. And he said, hey I need a vice president. And I said, well I am on my way back to (my hometown). I had a rough ride at this other institution, and I think I am just going to go back home. And he said don't do that. He said come over here and try this. And that is how I got here.”

CSSO K would share about the ability to network at small-private institutions. As a student worker, CSSO K built a relationship with an Athletic Director whose career path became their own. They would emulate and follow their mentor's career right into student services.

“...I said, I opened the gym with the Athletic Director, who was the Dean of Students. After I graduated— then came and asked me to join his staff, because athletics was under him, as the Coordinator. We are friends to this day. I have kind of followed him. He became Dean of Students. When he left, I became Dean of Students. So, he—I say faculty member and then our chancellor, president at the time, was a real advocate. Very—the opportunity to really interact with administration earlier in my career really was the support I had most.”

Relationships and networking is also known as “the power of one (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). The DEEP project identified conditions that lead to an institution meeting enrollment, retention, and graduation goals. “The power of one” focused on every member of an institution working to influence and support students’ college experience. Relationships are formed, and students feel as if they have gained an extended family willing to help them accomplish their personal goals. CSSOs talked about how engaging relationships and networking not only ensured academic success, but also had the ability to turn into opportunities.

### **Summary**

Chapter four presented findings from the qualitative interviews of 13 Chief Student Services Officers (CSSOs) at small-private institutions in the southern U.S. This was done to capture how CSSOs at small-private institutions enroll, retain, and engage new generations of college students. The researcher identified various themes associated

with the unique perspectives of CSSOs who found ways to meet the needs of students without resources that are found at larger or public institutions. By utilizing the personal and professional reflections of the thirteen CSSOs, conclusions, and recommendations are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Introduction**

The following chapter presents further discussion of the findings from chapter four, as well as recommendations from the findings. The importance of this study is to find innovative measures to support Generation Z students at small private institutions. The qualitative study addressed the role of student services on college campuses. Student services supports institutional goals to enroll, retain, and create an engaging on-campus student experience. Faced with the challenge of addressing the needs of a diverse student body, a new generation of students known as Generation Z will begin to enroll in college. The literature defines the generation as tech savvy individuals who are not comfortable with educational debt. The children of Xers, Gen Z came of age during the greatest technological leap in history (Poanick-Goodwin, 2010). They were comfortable living in a digital world, which has led to the emergence of online high schools.

They have grown up concerned with the financial hardships of their parents. Faced with this reality, many students are choosing to begin their college experience at a community college or online, leaving small-private institutions to figure out how to enroll students with a higher price tag. Current CSSOs shared their personal undergraduate and professional experiences that confirmed the benefits of small-private institutions and staff who choose to work for such institutions. This chapter presents a proposed solution, implications for implementation, practical research and leadership implications. Final conclusions and follow up will be addressed at the end of the chapter.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative grounded study is to understand how personal and professional experiences can successfully enroll, retain, and engage students.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim was to use evidence from the findings to establish new hiring practices for new Chief Student Services Officers at small private colleges and universities to create and develop Student Services teams that use personal experiences to support an institution's enrollment, retention, and engagement goals for new student populations.

### **Proposed Solution**

By interviewing thirteen Chief Student Services Officers or CSSOs on their personal undergraduate and professional experiences, four themes emerged:

1. Faculty and Staff Working as Individuals or Collectively to Support Student Success
2. Importance of Staff Selection and Awareness of Institutional Culture
3. Value of multi-generational environments
4. Relationships and networking.

These themes address the importance of having the right staff for the institution. By focusing on staff selection, CSSOs can identify relatable candidates who demonstrate a willingness to work within limitations of a small-private institution. The Project DEEP team identified institutions that were consistently successful in enrollment management, retention and graduation rates. The research supports the literature by identifying how social connectedness, student involvement and engagement, and the approachability of

faculty and staff influence individuals to enroll and retain at a school (Roberts & Styron, 2008).

Current literature on the importance of hiring the “right” staff addresses how having a system in place will lead to better hires. In a study involving an owner who hired a manager to supervise a Mexican resort restaurant, the owner used the individual’s 10 years of experience and gut-feeling to hire the new manager (Herman, 1994). When the owner returned after being away from the restaurant, they found the business dirty, increased food cost, resignations of a few senior staff, and decreased revenue (1994). It is in this place the owner realized that experience and a gut-feeling is not a good predictor of how an individual will work within an environment.

The hiring practices at the department of corrections would need for better hiring practice one step further, as they looked for individuals who could handle the unique environment and had experiences that clearly showed that they could respect the boundaries between employee and inmate. The solution took into consideration the interview process. Historically, most Correction Officers (COs) were hired using unstructured interviews and/or civil service exams (Morgan & Smith, 2009). The study found when a warden focused on a series of initial processes, they were able to make better hires. One of these processes introduced a structured behavioral interview (2009). The structured behavioral interview relied on research studies that clearly showed the interview process can be greatly improved if certain criteria are met (2009). Questions should be job related, fair to all applicants, and focused on past behavior which ask about what an individual has done or situational questions based on their past (2009).

By implementing the new interviewing processes, the department of corrections were able to hire employees who retained well, and who could handle the challenges of working with inmates. In student support services at small-private institutions, difficulties experienced require the selection of staff who can provide additional information on how they can relate to the student body and handle the campus culture.

The research confirms that CSSOs of small-private institutions have direct influence over the individuals hired in student services. The proposed solution recommends the addition of six interview questions administered during the staff selection process. The proposed interview questions are located in Appendix B.

These six questions provide a solution to making sure passionate individuals are employed within student services who understand how to work with limited resources and who are committed to engaging prospective and new students. The additional six questions could be implemented during a candidate's first interview. It is important to have a visible image of the candidate. The ability to see the candidate allows the interviewer to see a candidate's body language and demeanor while answering questions. It is recommended that a Skype interview be utilized when the candidate is not within close proximity of the institution. The questions should not be asked at the start of the interview, but worked throughout standard questions about work-related experiences and qualifications.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of Key Players in Implementation**

The CSSOs and the human resources (HR) department are key players in the recommended process. HR should validate the addition of the six questions before implementation. As a knowledgeable body on institutional hiring practice, it is key that

HR support the six questions and provide insight into making sure the additional questions are compliant with state and federal laws.

Naturally, CSSOs are other key players in the implementation of the reflective questions. It is the responsibility of the CSSO to meet with their direct reports to create support and buy-in. Student service personnel with the delegated responsibility of hiring qualified staff must also embrace the value in these questions and accept it as an identifier for finding individuals who are the right fit for the institution.

### **Leader's Role in Implementing Proposed Solution**

The role of leader is to set the tone for why it is important to ask questions that require a candidate to reflect on their undergraduate experiences and demonstrate knowledge of the small private institution environment. It is safe to assume that even before such questions can be given to the candidate, the CSSO must make sure that he/she is operating under the same charge. They must also be comfortable with sharing about their undergraduate and professional experiences that allow them to make tough decisions when it comes to supporting enrollment, retention, and student engagement issues. Any sign of disconnection between the CSSO and their direct reports may possibly make it difficult to understand why such practices are essential to hiring the right personnel.

### **Evaluation and Timeline for Implementation and Assessment**

The timeline for implementation depends on the number of vacant positions within student services, and if the institution is under a hiring freeze. However, in preparation, the following timeline is ideal for the implementation of the additional interview questions:

- The first step is working with human resources to make sure the questions are approved as is, or if questions should be amended to follow all Equal Opportunity Employer laws. It is also important to address any concerns about information provided by a candidate that should be omitted.
- After the questions have been cleared, the CSSO should meet with their division or anyone with hiring authority to discuss the importance of such questions, and define a series of “key words” that show relatability to their unique student and the institutional environment. At this time, it may be important to test the questions on their staff. The questions should be evaluated to make sure they make sense and that candidates are able to answer the questions in a way that will provide a hiring committee with the information to select the “right fit” for the department.
- Questions will need to be asked during the first interview, and asked once again if there is a second interview. This will check for consistency within their answers, and to make sure that a future employee is ready to handle the challenges of a small private institution

Assessment should be done after the interview has been conducted, and again during the one-year staff review. The hiring committee should immediately assess how well the questions worked during the initial interview. Did questions appear to catch the interviewee off-guard, or did they feel comfortable with the reflective questions? This will be an important step in the assessment piece, as issues with the questions may call for the questions to be reworked or turned into a case study or a series of questions required to be answered during the application process.

The second assessment should take place during the one-year staff review. It may be a six month review at some institutions. Such assessments should be done internally, and shared with the CSSO, but not the employee. Do the additional questions allow student affairs to hire the right personnel for the institution? Is the employee competent, confident, and engaged in the institutional culture and community? Are they lacking in other areas? The individuals may be great at connecting with students, but lack the skills needed in administration or other critical areas to the operations of student services.

These two assessment benchmarks should provide enough insight into the value of such questions in finding the right fit for student services.

### **Convincing Others to Support the Proposed Solution**

As previously mentioned, CSSOs must first model the importance of identifying with the current student need, and demonstrate a clear understanding of the current campus environment. Any disconnect would make it difficult to create buy in from their staff. CSSOs will be responsible for working with their current staff to receive input on what a student services professional looks like at their institution. CSSOs should allow their direct-reports to answer the questions themselves, and confirm if the questions will aid them in their hiring practices. It is also important that staff have the opportunity to talk about their current experiences at the institution and how new hires can best support the student experience. There is no real conflict seen with implementing this process.

### **Critical Pieces Needed for Implementation and Assessment**

The only critical pieces to implement and assess the usefulness of the interview questions should be handled by the direct reports of the CSSOs or personnel who have hiring authority. I would also add the human resources department as another critical

player in the implementation of the Dissertation in Practice. As previously stated, no additional cost or resources are required. The questions will need prior approval by human resources. Student services staff will need to be supportive of the questions, and the one year evaluation of staff who were selected under the new interview questions.

### **Internal and External Implications for the Organization**

The research has shown the importance of having the right personnel for the institution. By implementing the additional six questions, CSSOs can identify the candidates that appear to understand their unique student body and the work environment of a small private institution. The internal and external implications should be positive. The only internal issue would be the changing of the student services culture. A few CSSOs voiced their frustrations with employees who did not understand the students for which they served or the institution's environment. It is safe to assume that by implementing these questions, CSSOs will be able to identify talented and relatable student services staff. One can make the assumption that for current staff, who are not passionate about their role at the small institution, may feel threatened by a specific approach to hiring qualified individuals. The external implications are once again found in the data. Stories about employees recruiting in restaurants and airports shows a commitment to the institution and supporting enrollment management. Much like a non-profit organization, employees at small private institutions must believe in their product or service. They must see the benefits in the education and how it is the only solution for Generation Z students.

### **Implications and Considerations for Leaders Facing Implementation of Proposed Solution**

CSSOs should be comfortable with the implementation of these questions. If the CSSO is not leading by example, then these six questions will not work. It is important to acknowledge that this plan is for new CSSOs. If they do not come into the position empowered to focus on developing current employees to understand the importance of engaging and relating to the student body, then it may be difficult to create buy in with their staff. New CSSOs should be aware of their philosophy on student support services and the out-of-classroom experience. They should spend the first few months developing trust and rapport with their direct reports, before introducing the six questions. As long as the CSSO is not trying to play politics or establish dominance, they should have no problem getting their team to go along with a new hiring practice.

### **Evaluation Cycle**

As previously mentioned, the evaluation cycle should start after the interview has been completed. Individuals serving on the hiring committee should have an opportunity to discuss the candidate's performance and how well can they relate to the current campus culture. I will also add that a second evaluation should take place after all candidates have been successfully interviewed. This will be a good opportunity to compare answers against the other candidates. This process can take place as soon as the interview has been completed, or after all candidates have completed their first interview.

The second evaluation cycle should happen at the sixth month or one year staff evaluation process. Performed independently of the candidate, their direct supervisor

should discuss the performance review with CSSOs. This will be the best opportunity to see if the six additional questions are positive indicators of staff success at the institution.

### **Summary of the Study**

The study was personal. I have found an unexpected career in student support services at small private institutions. Centered around the liberal arts, a commitment to educating the disadvantaged and marginalized, or a specific religious approach to education, small private institutions allow students to receive both an education and participate in a community of learners. The study focused on Chief Student Services Officers or CSSOs who lead student services divisions at small private institutions. Individuals who choose to serve in this career field often do so with limited resources and pressing deadlines. As the literary review confirms, student services or student affairs developed out of faculty who took on the added responsibilities to care for the student outside of the classroom. Today, student services staff must understand academic success, counselling techniques, career assessments and job trends, and pop culture. It is a tough job, but the individuals who do it understand the possibilities with changing the trajectory of a student's life.

The qualitative study of thirteen CSSO interviews confirmed that student success ultimately revolves around individuals who serve within various departments that ensure students enroll, retain, and engage in the campus community. Four themes were identified from the data: 1.) Faculty and Staff Working as Individuals or Collectively to Support Student Success, 2.) Importance of Staff Selection and Awareness of Institutional Culture, 3.) Value of multi-generational environments, and 4.) Relationships and Networking. These themes all point to the importance of having the right staff for the

right institution. As CSSOs reflected on their own undergraduate experiences and professions, they concluded that hiring the right staff is how they overcome student barriers and limited resources. Individuals must be willing to go above and beyond their offices and job description, because they accept that their students deserve every opportunity to achieve an education.

The dissertation in practice piece was created based on the limited time and resources of student services divisions at small private institutions. The one area that CSSOs can count on is who they hire. By creating a series of questions that require a candidate to reflect on their undergraduate experiences, and institutional knowledge that goes beyond status and figures, CSSOs will have the opportunity to see if an individual can identify with the student body and understand the challenges faced at small private institutions.

As Generation Z students prepare to enroll into college, small private institutions are competing against online programs, community colleges, and the affordability of public institutions. If Generation Z students are to be successful, they must gain experiences and skills that allow them to communicate and work with diverse groups. Small private institutions are in a unique position to practice a vocation, develop skills that are sought after, and ultimately make connections to student, faculty, and staff that can lead to employment or a graduate program. Selecting the right staff will ensure that students develop holistically and find success after college.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The dissertation in practice is a commitment to finding a solution to the need to market small private institutions to Generation Z students. There is a commitment to all younger generations to ensure their safety and success. They are our future leaders. They deserve every opportunity to find success in their lifetime, and small private institutions create environments that allow students to explore and dream. CSSOs and the individuals who serve in student services at these institutions do so because they care about the mission of the school and want to make a difference in young adults' lives. Unlike their peers at public and larger private institutions, they do not have large endowments or tax revenue to supplement increasing tuition costs and out-of-date facilities. Students who attend these institutions are looking for opportunities and a community to help ensure their individual success. By creating a series of reflective questions, CSSOs can ensure that only individuals who are passionate about their institution and students are on their team. Students so often find that it is not the program, sport, or location of a school that attracts them – it is the people. Students, faculty, and staff all working together are what make the academic experience worth the cost of tuition. Relationships lead to degrees, employment, and a better life for the student and their family.

Considerations for further research is once again centered around the Chief Student Services Officers or CSSOs. While attempting to arrange interviews, many CSSOs simply did not have the time to give or had to keep rescheduling because of a heavy workload or unexpected meeting with their respected president or board of directors. Many of them who made it into the study voiced concerns over politics, transitioning president administrations, and hostile environments. It was evident that

these individuals were stressed and frustrated at times. Long hours and stressful situations, coupled with limited resources and high expectations cannot be good for one's physical health. Many of the CSSOs appeared to have a connection to faith or religious practice. I am interested in collecting more data on the overall wellness of a CSSO at a small-private institution. How do they take care of themselves? How do they stay motivated when direct reports do not embrace the culture of the institution. As we focus on the right personnel for the institution, it becomes equally important to discuss the general wellness and stress of CSSOs at a small-private institutions. What are the CSSOs' perceptions of keeping their own teams motivated and not burned out by the hostile environments of private education? What are student services doing to retain individuals who do not get jaded or burned out?

### **Summary**

The study looked for a simplistic answer to the ways in which Chief Student Services Officers hire individuals who can relate to the stories of their students, and understand the culture at small private institutions. Faced with limited resources, CSSOs can easily implement six questions that allow a candidate to reflect on their undergraduate experiences, and show awareness of the culture at a small private institution. These questions do not hinder an already stretched budget or staff, but ensure that only individuals who understand the responsibility of such institutions make it through the hiring process. As the questions are implemented, the responses will be evaluated after the initial interview, and once again at the one-year evaluation of any professional hired under the new hiring process. CSSOs will work with human resources to confirm that the additional questions apply with all Equal Employee Opportunity laws.

CSSOs will also seek approval from current staff to make sure that they can help identify important experiences that are needed to relate to their current student body and institutional needs.

### **Epilogue**

I have finally decided to work with Chief Student Services Officers or individuals who serve as Vice Presidents of Student Affairs for my study. As someone who aspires to hold such an office one day, I believe it will give me a firsthand account on what to expect as a new CSSO. I am aware that the prestige of the office comes with great responsibility and isolation. As I begin the interview process, I will search for awareness of the separation from the student experience and how CSSOs find opportunities to connect with staff and students.

It is November of 2015, and I had secured two interviews out-of-town. This would have been a positive experience; however, they never happened. Both CSSOs had to cancel because of campus emergencies. One CSSO had an emergency board meeting to prepare for, and the other had a student incident to address. This was the most frustrating moment of the process, because these were my first and second interviews.

I have taken a moment to find peace with the setback. CSSOs at small private institutions are busy. They are short-staffed, and lack the resources to be immune to last minute board meetings and student incidents. It shows a commitment to their position and students. For someone who does not like to disappoint or break a promise, this is something one must be comfortable with when serving in this position.

After the false start with my first interviews, I am moving forward with my dissertation interviews and collecting great data. One interview has caused me to pause and ask if my goal of being a president at a Historically Black College and University is worth it. The individual spoke about the challenges and hardships that many of these institutions face. The location of many schools are surrounded by communities that are violent and not supportive of the academic community. I understand the reality of limited

financial and staffing resources, however am I prepared to support students who see school as a paycheck and have no real desire to be successful or to help improve their communities? After this conversation, I had to work with a minority student who had already been in trouble for drug possession. Last weekend she was caught for sneaking in a resident, and then a few days later she was caught with alcohol. I have tried to help this student, however she seems closed off. Our conversations about making decisions that will lead her to her goals and make her family proud fell on deaf ears. I am not sure if I could handle a majority of the student body with this same attitude towards their education. This has caused me to really think about why I want to be a president in an environment that I do not fully understand.

The interviews continue to move forward, in spite of a few cancellations and no responses to my emails or voicemails. I had an interview that talked about the politics at the executive level. It seems to confirm a recent pattern with CSSOs who are experiencing issues within the president's cabinet. One CSSO talked about ageism. I am personally fairly young for a director at my current employer. I think the next youngest director is at least nine years older than me. I could honestly see this as a real issues as I seek to move up the organization chart. Another CSSO talked about how quick one can be out of a job whenever a new president comes to the institution. Most presidents want their own people around them. They want to hire the people that will make decisions that support their vision for the institution. I understand this perspective; however, to see it play out is troubling. This particular CSSO was asked to resign. This individual had a wife and young family. To simply resign because the president does not want you seems hurtful. The other reality is that there is only one CSSO or vice president of student

affairs at an institution. Executive level positions are hard to come by. Once you secure one of these coveted positions, you can never go back to the previous level. Once again, I wonder, why do I want to do this?

As I begin to wrap up my interviews, I fully understand that CSSOs are busy and stretched thin. I reached out to about 60 CSSOs. About twenty responded and agreed to the interview. Only thirteen actually performed the interview. The reality is clear, CSSOs are busy individuals. It was easy for me to be upset; however, after reflecting on my own work schedule, it would also be impossible for me to submit to a 30 minutes interview. Too much was happening at work. Too many meetings, too many administrative responsibilities, too many student issues to consider. I often wondered if I should have picked Deans of Students or a director over a department to interview. However, once again, I think that individuals who choose to work at small private institutions understand that they cannot sit in their office. They have to be out connecting with students and supporting the university.

The end is near for the Dissertation In Practice. I thought about creating some type of coaching tool for new employees; however, as I discussed it with my own CSSO, it was very clear that she would not personally have the time to implement such a program. She understood the benefit, but explained that she would end up delegating the task to a direct-report. The same CSSO gave me the idea of creating standard questions to ask a candidate to reflect on their undergraduate experiences and knowledge of small-private institution environments. She enjoys meeting with candidates when time allows, however very often she is too busy to do so. If she could make sure that individuals who join our Student Affairs division care about our student body and believe in the mission

of the university, then she would feel comfortable with not being able to meet with every prospect before a job offer. Based on the data and the overwhelming stories about personal faculty and staff who made the difference in their undergraduate experiences, it was clear that creating a series of questions would be impactful and would not require additional resources. This process has made me question my own professional goals. I still want to be a president of a university and a CSSO. I never thought about all the things that could go wrong, or the professional and personal hardships one encounters in these positions. I tell my student leaders that if you are doing this job because of the money and attention, then what we ask you to do will never be worth the compensation. We can never pay you enough for the late night emergencies. It will never be worth it. So as I complete this process, is it worth it? Is the degree worth it? Are my goals and dreams worth it? If I desire to seek out positive changes that will set students on a course to fulfill their dreams, then yes. If I want money, respect, and glory, then no.

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## **Appendix**

### *Appendix A*

#### **Bill of Rights for Research Participants**

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research subject.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
  - a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
  - b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

*Appendix B***Interview Protocol****Proposed Reflective Questions**

Question 1: Please discuss your personal undergraduate experience? How does your past undergraduate experiences influence your work in higher education?

Question 2: Why do you select the institution in which you attend for your undergraduate degree? What factors were most important to you when making your decision?

Question 3: Name one person during your undergraduate experience who inspired, assisted, or motivated you as a student? What specifically did he or she do?

Question 4: Can you share what you know about our institution and what challenges a new student may face?

Question 5: How does this institution support your personal and professional career goals, and what challenges may you encounter here as a professional?

Question 6: Explain the relationship between student services, faculty and the student body?