

A Different Kind of Job Search: Post-Graduate Student Affairs Geographically Focused Searches

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As student affairs graduate students finish their academic work and begin their job searches, they must navigate a number of competing priorities including position, title, work responsibilities, functional area, salary, benefits and other aspects of the position. For some graduates, the most important consideration is geographical location – they want to be close to family, partners, or located in specific communities. As a result, they often have to be very flexible on other work considerations. They also sometimes feel isolated in their searches and get messages from peers that they are not doing their searches in the “right” way. This study examined the experiences of these students as they engaged in their job searches. While there is a vast amount of anecdotal information on the role of location in the student affairs job search, there is limited scholarship on the topic until now. This study begins to fill the scholarly gap on the role of location in the student affairs job search process.

Keywords: student affairs, job search, geographical focus

Boettcher, M.L. (2021). A different kind of job search: Post-graduate student affairs geographically focused searches. *Georgia Journal of College Student Affairs*, 37(2), 98-119.

ISSN: 2330-7269



The student affairs job search for students completing their graduate study is a time when emerging professionals practice self-awareness (Ardoin, 2014; Dixon, 2019) and identify their career and personal non-negotiables (Henshaw, 2018). Specifics job seekers take into account include institutional type, position, functional area, and geographical location. This time of transition is complex, difficult, and highly individualized.

Student Affairs Career Literature

Scholars have written about the professional preparation experiences of student affairs professionals during graduate school (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Liddell et al., 2014; Lombardi & Mather, 2016; Perez, 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Similarly, much has been written about new student affairs professionals on the job (Hirschy et al., 2015; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004, 2014; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Tull et al., 2009). However, the experiences of graduate students *during* the job search is unexplored. Liddell et al. (2014) identified this gap and asked, "What are the factors that influence early professionals' initial job placement? How do new professionals weigh their professional and personal interests with the array of available positions in the job market?" (p. 83).

The existing job-search literature for student affairs professionals is limited. Some scholarships included job search as a part of

the anticipatory socialization of emerging professionals (Duran & Allen, 2019; Lombardi & Mather, 2016; Lombardi et al., 2012; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Additionally, Renn and Hodges (2007) and Magolda and Carnaghi (2004; 2014) examined the first year experience of student affairs professionals on the job. Reece et al., (2019) explored notions of "fit" in student affairs. Winston et al. (2001) examined the job search and hiring process from the perspective of senior student affairs officers.

In terms of geography and the student affairs job search, Ardoin (2014) wrote, "There are places where you do not want to live... You may need to consider loved ones and whether you need, or want, to live in proximity to them" (p. 64). Johnson (2014) wrote of her job search, "Being geographically bound is both a blessing and a curse" (p. 120).

Much of the scholarship on the experiences of student affairs graduates transitioning into the workplace has focused on graduate preparation (Collins, 2009; Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009; Liddell, et al., 2014; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Additional consideration has been given to experiences of new(er) professionals on the job in terms of job satisfaction (Tull et al., 2009), attrition and retention (Belch et al., 2009; Renn & Hodges, 2007), and supervision (Tull et al., 2009; Renn & Hodges, 2007).

Post Graduate Job Search Literature

Scholarship about the post-graduate job search exists in a variety of other fields, but much of this is focused on job searches after students earn doctoral degrees. For example, there is scholarship on the job search for psychology (Prinstein & Patterson, 2013), statistics (Stasny, 2001), sociology (Kennelly & Spalter-Roth, 2006), and STEM field graduates (Ladner et al., 2012; Shulman, 2008). However, in terms of the job search for post-master's emerging student affairs professionals, scholarship is lacking.

Geographical Job Searches

Missing from the existing literature is an examination of the unique experience of emerging professionals who prioritize geographical location over other aspects of the job. More than 25 years ago, Kinser (1993) wrote, "Location was given as the number one reason for choosing a job... The fact that location is so important has implications for the coordination and advising of the job search process," (Kinser, 1993, pp. 10-11). This study explored the experiences of student affairs professionals emerging from their graduate programs who looked for jobs in specific geographical areas.

While there is anecdotal information across student affairs about master's degree graduates searching based on geographical areas, no study to date has explored this

issue in depth. Additionally, very little scholarship exists on student affairs graduate students' job search experiences while they are in the process of doing their searches. This study begins to fill both of these gaps in the scholarly literature.

Purpose of the Study

The research question for this study is: What is the experience of graduate students doing geographically focused job searches? These searches were in specific areas (proximity to certain cities) rather than regionally-focused searches. Due to a limited research and predominately anecdotal assumptions about the role of location in the job search, this study is necessary.

Research Methodology

Research Approach and Framework

This study's phenomenological, qualitative approach aligns with Creswell's (2014) perspective that a qualitative approach surfaces participants' knowledge and collects deep and rich data; and a constructivist approach affords space for participants to make meaning of their experiences. Semi-structured interviews allowed for additional participant autonomy in defining their experiences through the emergence of themes outside of the scripted interview questions (Patton, 2002).

Lent et al.'s (2002) Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) framework guided data analysis in this study. SCCT focuses on personal, external/environmental, and behavioral characteristics (Lent & Brown, 2008, p. 255). This theory builds on career decision-making as a function of self-efficacy, expectations, and personal goals (Lent et al., 1994).

Because my research focused specifically on how students navigated their searches, I used the early stages of the model - goal and efficacy-relevant supports, obstacles, and resources (Lent et al., 2002) - to frame this study. Lent et al., (1999) found developmental tasks are salient during school-to-work transition: translating goals into action; developing both specific task-related and broader work-readiness skills; and navigating goal-related contextual supports and barriers.

Data Collection & Analysis

I interviewed eight participants (two men and six women) between 24 and 26 years of age during their job searches. The number aligns with Creswell's (2014) suggestion of five to

twenty-five participants for a phenomenological study. Both men were white, four women were white and the two other women were Latinx. The participants were recent graduates of student affairs programs at two large, research, land-grant institutions in the Midwest and the Southeast. These institutions were chosen out of convenience as I had worked at both places - one as a practitioner and adjunct faculty member and the other as a full-time faculty member. As a result I was able to engage with students with whom I had already built rapport.

Both institutions had student affairs preparation programs graduated between 28 and 38 students annually. Both sites required assistantships or full-time employment as a condition of admission. All students in each of the programs were invited to participate in a larger study about the experiences of student affairs (SA) masters students navigating institutional culture during the job search. Those who shared that they were doing geographically focused searches were asked additional questions specifically related to that aspect of their search.

Table 1: Participants

Name	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Positions Sought	Reason for Geographic Search
Calvin	Man	White	Any in SA	Relationship
Jayne	Woman	White	Any in or out of SA	Relationship
Gavin	Man	White	Housing	Relationship
Sally	Woman	Latinx	Multicultural affairs; college access	Relationship / Family
Tiffany	Woman	White	Any in SA	Family
Susan	Woman	White	Any in SA except housing	Relationship
Sara	Woman	White	Any in SA except housing	Relationship
Maggie	Woman	Latinx	Housing	Family

Participants were interviewed as part of a larger study focused on navigating institutional culture in the job search. Conversations about the geographical search emerged during the first round of interviews for the larger study. First-round interviews were conducted when students were doing their searches in the spring and summer of their graduating year. Subsequent interviews were held in October and the following May when participants had completed their first academic year of work. The data for this study comes from the first round of interviews only. Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. I used open coding to identify themes.

Trustworthiness

I used member checking, reflective memo writing, and peer debriefing to ensure trustworthiness in this study. Member checking

involved sharing the emerging themes and exemplar quotes for each theme as well as transcripts with participants. Participants were asked to reflect on how the themes and quotes aligned with their own experiences. Throughout the process, I also engaged in reflective memo writing. As someone who worked in housing for nearly 15 years, I understood how common the notion that the first search after the graduate program is a broad, national search with a focus on housing can be. As a result, I used memo writing to check my own assumptions throughout the process (Denzin & Guba, 2017). I also consulted with two peer debriefers to discuss findings and confirm the themes I was identifying (Denzin & Guba, 2017).

Findings

Three themes surfaced in this study related to the search experiences of the participants:

self-efficacy, flexibility, and participants' focus on identifying life priorities. Students exercised self-efficacy by pushing against job search norms articulated by faculty, practitioners, and especially cohort peers. Participants talked about their individual ways of navigating the job search – particularly as their searches differed from other cohort members. Flexibility in the job search emerged as participants were less focused on specific jobs or functional areas and instead prioritized location in their searches. Finally, in making job decisions, participants defined their priorities in life – family, community, and inter-personal relationships – rather than job title, position, or salary.

Self-Efficacy: A Different Kind of Search

All participants talked about the role of self-efficacy in their job searches. Because they knew that their searches differed from those of others in their cohort, they acknowledged their process might be slower and they might be applying for fewer or different positions than their peers. Susan said she had a lot of feelings during her job search including being “jealous of all these people getting jobs and I still didn't have one.” While participants reported that some of their peers were job searching as early as November and December of the semester before graduation, participants in this study did not start looking for jobs until later. Jayne said:

I didn't find the job that I just interviewed for until the end of March. And so, especially for someone who doesn't want to go into res life and who has a specific location [where I'm searching] it's just not worth getting so worked up about the search because I may not find a job in higher ed until next fall.

Jayne also acknowledged that because of her geographical focus she would be looking for positions outside of student affairs.

Other participants focused on specific student affairs areas. Sally said:

I know for me I always felt like I was in a unique situation given my focus on very specific functional areas in very specific locations. Just being patient with what my process looked like and why my process looks this way is important.

Both Sally and Jayne understood that the timeline for their searches would be different from some of their cohort members. That said, even this shared understanding of their processes did not mean that their searches were identical. Jayne was willing to look not only beyond a specific area in student affairs, but outside of student affairs altogether. In contrast, Sally was focused both geographically and in terms of functional area within student affairs.

Another way that participants talked about doing individualized job searches was the actual interview process. For those looking for housing positions, unlike many of their peers, they did not attend large placement conferences such as The Placement Exchange (TPE) at the NASPA national conference or the Osh Kosh Placement Exchange (OPE). Gavin said:

That's something that when TPE and OPE were happening I was feeling somewhat pressured to go to them because I felt like everybody was going to them... but they're so expensive that I couldn't just spend the money when I was so location bound. That was just something that was a little difficult. I felt like there was some sort of pressure within the field to go and go through the experience. I felt like it wasn't really going to work for me.

Gavin went on to stress that once he committed to his own kind of search, his confidence about not attending the larger placement events increased. Gavin's point was another example of how participants in this study came to understand that their searches would not be like many of their peers and how they developed self-efficacy in building their own search processes.

Calvin also developed self-efficacy around a different kind of search process and

said this realization helped him avoid stress. He found that others doing national searches talked about the normalized routines of searches related to when jobs were available. He saw his peers saying to one another, "This is what *the* process looks like" rather than "This is what *my* process looks like." He said understanding that his process was different "kind of eased my nerves allowing me to keep things in perspective."

Gavin highlighted another difference:

I've always heard from people that you're interviewing them as much as they're interviewing you. I felt like that really wasn't the case for me because for every single interview I had I felt like I had to be perfect. I felt like I wasn't being authentic to an extent ... I had to do everything that they wanted because of the limited schools that I was looking at. Even little things like typing out an email response back to them it took me about twice as long because I focused so much on my wording. I wanted to be this perfect candidate in their eyes.

The messages participants said they received from peers, faculty, assistantship providers, and others did not align with their experiences. Since participants were not able or willing to compromise on location, they felt they had to compromise in some of the other areas of the job search process. As a result,

they developed their own strategies for success in the context of their specific searches.

Communicating with the cohort. One decision participants said they had to make was how open to be about their searches. Susan said she decided to be open about her search, but how she shared information changed over her final semester:

I had two or three people in my friend group that applied and interviewed for positions that I sent them, and I didn't feel like with me being geographically focused that people thought of me the same way – to do the same things for me. I felt like it was kind of just assumed that I would find something. And so I kind of, not on purpose – it wasn't an intentional action, but I kind of stopped [sharing postings]. I guess I just focused more on my own search because it just seemed to me that my peers weren't necessarily looking out for my job search as much as I was looking out for theirs.

Calvin added, "The nature of how this job process goes has helped me to concentrate on myself and not get caught up so much on what other people are doing." For both of these participants, as well as several others, the idealized communally supportive job search process became more individualized

as the final semester in the program progressed.

Sara shared that even in trying to be as open as possible, there were moments of discomfort during her search. She said, "I think a lot of the positions that I've applied for I've been up against other people in my cohort which is awkward." She went on to say that there was one case where a cohort member asked if she had heard back about a job they had both applied for. She shared that she had been offered the job, "and we had to navigate that conversation which was a little bit uncomfortable." As a result, while self-efficacy was a key element for participants, they were at no point completely disconnected from their cohort peers.

Susan shared that she was surprised by the intensity of her reactions to cohort members. She expressed frustration with people discouraging her from searching in a specific area and encouraging her to search nationally. She said:

That would make me angry. I would say, "It's my job search and I kind of want to do it the way I want to do it." And then I would get angry because I would get pity from people... People would ask, "Where are you in the job search?" And I would say, "Oh, you know, I want to stay [in this area] because my fiancé is here," and people would still be like "Oh, okay. That's

okay, I guess.” It made me angry that I would have to A) rationalize why I wanted to stay here, and B) people felt obligated to tell me, “That’s okay.” Whereas like if they said, “I’m going to California,” the response would be “Oh that’s great!” That has been really hard for me to process through – the typical emotions that you feel in the job search, the whole anxiety, the jealousy, the sadness, all these things, but then it’s the anger for me has been something I wasn’t expecting to deal with.

Engaging with the cohort was difficult for participants doing geographically focused searches. Because participants’ searches were different, they often got resistance as well as unsolicited and unwelcome guidance from those who did not understand what they were doing.

Tiffany discussed the stress she experienced because others did not understand her search process. She said:

The most stressful thing, honestly, has been other people that don't really know my process or don't really understand and think that they have to help me in some way to find a job. Because I know deep down in my heart that I'm going to get a job, it's just a matter of time... That's the most stressful thing – when other

people try to get in my process and I don't need them there because I know my process.

Even as they developed self-efficacy in navigating their searches, their different kind of search was something participants had to explain. In contrast, doing national searches was commonly understood and at times even considered the “right” way to do a job search. As a result, participants in this study often got unsolicited advice that was not helpful to them on either a practical or emotional level.

The emotional aspects of their different searches were not just about participants’ experiences, however. Because in most cases participants in this study were slower to get job offers than many of their peers, they had to navigate their feelings when others got positions. This created a tension for many participants as they simultaneously wanted to celebrate with their cohort members but also felt a surge of self-doubt each time someone else got a job while they were still looking. Calvin said he knew his peers who were doing national housing searches were “going to be at the forefront of getting hired.” He added that he did want to compare himself to those cohort members but tried to “be happy for people because that’s really awesome that they just got a job, and it’s not quite my time yet.”

Communicating with others doing geographically focused searches. A key part of participants' self-efficacy in the geographically focused job search process was cultivating a network of support. While participants talked about the struggles they had with cohort members not understanding or supporting their searches, those interviewed for this study were able to develop a community of support with others doing geographically focused searches. All participants talked about eventually finding a network of other people doing the same kind of search they were. Jayne shared:

I've also found that people like me who are location bound - we kind of formed a little group even though we weren't extremely close within the cohort. We make sure to talk to each other after class each day and say, "Hey. How's it going?" because we kind of have solidarity and we're supportive of each other, so that's been kind of a cool development.

This shared experience also fostered the opportunity for participants to share potential jobs in a supportive way rather than seeing geographically bound job searches as a competitive process with others looking in the same areas. Sara said:

I know [a cohort member], she's doing the same interview for the same position that I am. We've been talking

about, "Hey, good luck. I really support you. I know it's gonna work out for both of us." We've applied for a lot of the same positions and interviewed for some of those same positions because we've shared information. We're looking in similar areas and so we've just been really supportive of each other, which I think has been really nice to have someone who doesn't ignore me when they see me. We're honest with each other and we just appreciate what each other brings to the table.

By being open about their search processes, participants in this study were able to build new networks. The shared job search approach not only fostered support, but also openness to share resources and opportunities. Since participants were already connected through the program, this sharing afforded them the chance to build their regional network with peers with whom they may not have had significant relationships before.

Flexibility

Another area every participant highlighted was the need and willingness to be flexible in their job searches. This often meant looking in a variety of student affairs areas as well as looking beyond student affairs all together. While not everyone was ready to look outside of higher education, all participants

realized they would need to be more open with types of jobs since they were prioritizing location. Calvin said:

I think that's one of the things about a geographic search, is that you have to be more flexible... I'm fairly open to things. I'm willing to compromise on certain, or quite a few aspects. I'm really just open... I don't want to get myself into a bad position, but I think I'm fairly flexible and I can adapt.

While Susan was also open to different opportunities, she did put some restrictions on her search. She said, "I am very flexible except for the fact that I do not want to do residence life." Jayne agreed that flexibility in job and institution was important, but again was not open to absolutely every job. She said,

I've really been looking at positions mainly at the [university where search was focused] and then going outward to some of the smaller institutions in the surrounding area. I haven't really been too narrow-minded in my focus for what I want as a job, but at the same time I have been only applying for ones that I could see myself actually wanting to do.

Tiffany added:

I'm looking in student activities, academic advising, and alumni relations just generally, but I'm not ruling out any others that I come across. I'm

looking for something that will jump out at me and will give me a lot of opportunity to build on the experience that I already have. But because I'm looking two to four hours from my parents that kind of limits things a little bit.

Participants throughout the study shared that they had to be more flexible on the types of positions they were applying for since they were not flexible on location in their job searches. They talked about navigating the process and interviews differently because of their need to get a job in a specific area. They also shared that they were comfortable with these choices because they were prioritizing other parts of their lives over position or title in their jobs.

Institutional type. Not only were participants in geographically focused searches flexible and adaptable in terms of job type, but they were also willing to work at different types of institutions. Calvin talked about the fact that he was grateful to be looking in an area with a variety of different types of institutions. He said his background opened him up to different places to work.

I went to a small, private liberal arts college for my undergrad and that's where I would really love to work... Also, I would definitely be open to working here [at graduate institution]

even though it's a larger state institution. I think looking at community college would also be really awesome and would be a great place to work. At this point, I'm very open to anything.

Tiffany had also attended a smaller private institution. She said:

Of course, if it was up to me, I would want to be at a smaller institution just because that is where I did my undergrad... but with the job search I am very open, and I've applied for jobs at all institution types.

Maggie agreed and talked about the people she would be working with being more important than the institutional type. She said, "Right now I'm looking mostly at the people around me - who would be my potential colleagues? I really believe that if I belong at a place then that's the place I'll go no matter what type of institution." All participants shared a willingness to look across institutional types for employment.

Sally also looked beyond traditional higher education. She said, "I was definitely open to community college or even non-profits - open to organizations that weren't quote - unquote 'attached' to a university." Jayne acknowledged that she was looking more broadly as well, though with some reluctance. She said:

I haven't really been telling a lot of people this because I don't really feel great about it myself either, but I have actually accepted a job outside of Student Affairs. I'm still interviewing for positions and I will actively be pursuing positions in higher education, but I am not able to take a break from a paycheck for any amount of time because of my student loans. So, I have accepted a position working for a different company in the area. Finances have definitely affected my job search.

These examples highlight the participants' focus on finding a job within their location rather than seeking a specific title or role. While the motivations and approaches varied, participants shared a willingness to think broadly about the work they would do.

Identifying Life Priorities

A final theme that emerged from this study was participants' focus on their life holistically. Rather than prioritizing position, title, or specific job responsibilities, they looked at the job as a part of their larger life. Gavin spoke to his priorities in the job search saying:

How I approached my search was probably different than what a lot of people recommend but it's because I knew that being in this area was more

important to me than anything. My personal life took precedence over everything else.

Sara shared a similar perspective, saying:

You really have to be honest with yourself and know what you're looking for and why. And I think you have to prioritize. I'm getting married and that's my priority and I know that I'm going to have a job that I love - hopefully - and I'm going to be in a career field that I love, but that's not my number one priority in life. My fiancé has a wonderful job that he loves that he's very successful at that will be great for us in our future. I had to prioritize that.

The theme of life priorities was threaded through all of the interviews. In the end, participants realized they were making choices and had decided some things were more important than others. Sara said, "I had to make some sacrifices. Hopefully it's not going to end up feeling that way in the long run." And Gavin summarized his search saying, "For me there really wasn't a perfect fit but there was a best fit."

Other participants shared similar sentiments. They knew that there was an element of compromise involved - particularly when doing a job search to be near a partner. In each of their cases - regardless of the motivation for the geographically focused

search, the job search was simply a part of the much larger picture of what they wanted in their lives after graduation.

Discussion

This study responds to a call for additional research on the job search process of student affairs professionals (Lidell et al., 2014; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). It also adds to the existing literature on student affairs professionals' socialization into the profession.

The participants in this study talked about three key areas related to their geographically-focused job search experiences: self-efficacy, flexibility, and identifying life priorities. This study adds to the existing scholarship as it utilizes the SCCT framework (Lent et al., 2002) and examines school-to-work transition tasks (Lent, et al., 1999) specifically through the lens of student affairs master's students moving from graduate school to the workforce.

Self-Efficacy: Goals & Tasks

Lent et al. (2002) defined goal self-efficacy as including "personal beliefs about one's ability to perform behaviors required for success" and task self-efficacy as the ability "to perform tasks required for success" (p. 14). In this study participants were confident in their ability to acquire jobs in specific geographic settings (goal self-efficacy). The goal - acquiring a job - is something that students

were able to do which aligns with the goal self-efficacy aspect of Lent et al.'s (2002) social cognitive career theory.

Participants were also confident in their ability to complete the tasks required to get employment in their chosen locations (task self-efficacy). Some of the tasks included applying for multiple positions in a variety of student affairs areas and / or at different institutional types. In each case they exercised self-efficacy in achieving tasks in support of their larger goal. This self-efficacy not only aligns with SCCT (Lent et al., 2002), but also with Baxter-Magolda's (2003) discussion of student confidence. She connected self-authorship to the experiences of students in graduate and professional school writing that students had to make decisions in their lives writing "they had no one but themselves on which to rely," (Baxter-Magolda, 2003, p. 245).

Participants in this study anticipated a longer search that started later than their peers who were doing national searches. They did not participate in large employment exchanges such as TPE or OPE. During interviews, they focused on pitching themselves than on interviewing the teams and supervisors they would be working with. They were more focused on getting a job than getting the *perfect* job. As Shetty et al. (2016) found, student affairs job seekers must identify ways of doing searches and

take positions that align with their personal and professional goals. The participants in this study did exactly that.

Additionally, participants were strategic in managing their stress, emotions, and communication around searches. They had to train themselves not to compete with or compare their searches with those of their cohort peers. Lent, et al., (1994) wrote that self-efficacy through the job search included individuals' ability to manage emotion in the face of obstacles. In the case of this study, those obstacles surfaced primarily around the limitations of the job search in the context of a specific geographical area.

Participants also had to manage emotions related to stress with their cohort. This finding aligns with what Lombardi and Mather (2016) found. "Participants talked about not wanting the transition process to be competitive or to compare themselves to others but found that a difficult task." (Lombardi & Mather, 2016, p. 90). This study highlights that, while it was difficult, participants felt they were able to avoid competition and comparison with others through the search process.

Role of the Cohort. Participants not only talked about their searches less frequently, but some also shared job postings less often when they realized their peers were not sharing postings with them. This aligns with the

role of coping efficacy as outlined by Lent, et al., (2002).

However, participants identified and networked with others doing geographical searches. Even when they might be searching in the same area, participants shared job postings with their geographically focused peers. They also were able to process their different kinds of searches with others doing job searches that prioritized a specific location. While Lombardi and Mather (2016) found cohorts were generally supportive, participants in this study identified primarily others doing the same kinds of geographically focused searches as supportive. They found other cohort members less encouraging.

Participants' different kinds of searches not only fostered the opportunity to communicate more with others doing the same kinds of searches, but they also adapted their communication with others over time. While many communicated openly early in the search process, they communicated less as they realized their peers did not understand the kinds of searches they were doing. This aligns with Lombardi and Mather (2016) who found covert challenges such as a comparative undercurrent (p. 94) among cohort members during the search process.

Participants also emphasized that geographically focused searches are not identical. Participants connected with peers

doing this kind of search, but there were different approaches for each person. For example, some focused on a specific area of student affairs while others looked more broadly. Some participants could afford to go without employment for a period of time; others could not. For some, even the definition of "geographically-focused" varied – some looked in a specific town or city, others looked within a few hours of a city. Others searched in proximity to a partner, while some focused on wanting to live in a particular community or being close to family. Doing a geographically focused search did not mean the same thing to every person but was more focused than a regional search.

Flexibility

Because participants were prioritizing a specific location, they were open to different types of positions and institutions. While a few participants focused on a specific functional area, some were looking in both student and academic affairs. Others looked for positions outside of higher education and anticipated having to take other jobs until they could secure a higher education position. These notions of finding "good enough" positions by being flexible meant that those doing geographically focused searches had lower expectations and dealt with potential organizational shortcomings. They were not after

the perfect job, just a job they thought they would enjoy.

This more flexible mindset may actually set up geographically focused job searchers to be more successful in the long-term in their first and subsequent roles after graduation. Wanous (1980) discussed expectations and the need for both job seekers and hiring teams to be realistic throughout the hiring process. Similarly, Adkins (1995) found that when seekers anticipated new jobs being satisfactory it increased satisfaction with the job once they were in their new positions. In the case of this study, that meant having reasonable expectations and being flexible enough to allow for both pros and cons in a new job helped geographically focused job seekers find positions that worked in the context of their larger lives.

Additionally Hirt (2006) and Kuk et al. (2010) discussed the importance of adaptability and flexibility in the context of student affairs as a profession. Because participants in this study started their careers exercising flexibility and adaptability in their job searches, they have already shown skills relevant and important in the field. This study therefore makes an additional contribution to the literature related to student affairs job searches, transition, and necessary skills.

Identifying Life Priorities

Focusing on location rather than position, title, or functional area was a choice participants made for different reasons. Six out of the eight participants focused their searches because of a partner. Lombardi and Mather (2016) found focusing on a specific area was not unusual for students in their study. They wrote, "Several of the participants limited their job search to one geographic area in order to either remain in close proximity to their partner or identified locations that could accommodate employment for both partners" (Lombardi & Mather, 2016, p. 88). Prioritizing this relationship in the job search was one example of why participants focused their searches to a particular area. Others included family or other connections to the targeted community or city/town.

Additionally, participants highlighted that their career was not their top priority. They were willing to take a position that might have less status because they prioritized location over function or position type. As Ardoin (2014) and Kinser (1993) asserted, the role of location in the job search matters in significant ways to many emerging student affairs professionals. Consistently, participants also discussed the role of making sacrifices and compromises in their searches. They engaged in job interviews with a focus on getting the job. Participants did not examine the institution to the level of depth and

detail they might have if they did not need to secure a position in a specific location.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings in this study are beneficial not only to students preparing for or engaged in geographically focused searches, but also to supervisors, faculty, mentors, and hiring decision-makers. Just as job seekers can identify their priorities and build structures to support their decisions through the search process, so can others provide support and encouragement for the different types of searches students navigate. This study provides an important resource to those doing geographically focused searches. Instead of relying on anecdotal information, students now have research that provides insight into the experiences of those who have conducted geographically focused searches.

Implications for Practice

The implications for supervisors, mentors, and faculty working with students conducting geographically focused searches are significant. Supervisors can provide better guidance to students as they prepare for job searches. Not only can supervisors and mentors share the results of this study with students doing these searches, but they can also engage in conversations without making assumptions about the types of searches students do. This provides the opportunity for

a richer and more individually focused dialogue with and supervision of students about to graduate.

Similarly, student affairs faculty can engage in activities in capstone courses and dialogue throughout the program articulating that individual search experiences for students vary. Beyond each student having their own journey into graduate programs and the profession, faculty can use this information to disrupt notions of what a search entails. This will provide additional support for the students doing geographically focused searches. Beyond that, however, it will open up space for students to talk about and think about their individual searches and how potential jobs fit into students' lives rather than job titles and positions being the sole focus of searches.

Finally, this study is also useful for both job seekers and hiring decision makers. Hiring teams can use this information to understand the different priorities new professionals bring into their searches. As a result, hiring teams may choose to speak more explicitly to how working in their areas aligns with who their staff members are – including ways they support new staff beyond the workplace. As Lombardi and Mather (2016) wrote, "Hiring organizations and graduate school programs can improve their socialization tactics if they better understand how new professionals experience their entry into

student affairs and into their first positions in the field” (p. 94). This study provides support for the bridge from school to work for student affairs program graduates.

Implications for Future Research

While this study begins to fill the gap in the literature on student affairs graduate students’ job searches, much work remains to be done. How this experience is affected by identity and intersectional identities is in need of further exploration. What role do race, gender identity, and other identities play in the post-master’s job search? Are there different experiences depending on students’ ages and previous work experience before beginning the master’s program? What about the job searches of graduates who are also parents or have other personal or family obligations?

What other job search stories are overlooked? Are there conversations that can happen with faculty or supervisors that can more fully address the needs of *all* students? What role can placement experiences play in attending to students engaging in geographically focused searches? More research will help students, practitioners, and faculty understand the complexities of the job search process.

Another area for further research is comparing the student affairs job search

experience with those in other career fields. Are there approaches taken in other areas of education, health fields, non-profit employment, or additional careers that might inform the student affairs experience? Can other professions learn from student affairs?

Conclusion

The geographically focused job search is understudied in student affairs literature. Participants in this study shared high levels of flexibility and patience with their searches. Additionally, students engaging in geographically focused searches talked about the impact of the competitive / comparative nature of the cohort model and experienced pressure from peers and others about their search processes. Compared to cohort peers doing broad, national, searches and those who might be applying for dozens of jobs, geographically focused job seekers applied for fewer positions. This inspired self-doubt about whether or not the geographically focused job seeker is doing the search in the “right” way. Finding support and understanding their unique searches proved to be essential to participants looking for positions in a specific geographical area.

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