

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING RESIDENCE  
DIRECTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF A DEPARTURE OF A COLLEAGUE

by

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

### A Phenomenological Approach to Understanding Residence Directors' Perceptions of a Departure of a Colleague

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Research on residence directors, as well as on turnover in higher education in general, is limited (Janosik et al., 2003). This qualitative phenomenological study focused on understanding residence directors' perceptions of the departure of a colleague. The literature on residence directors has shortcomings in that it focuses mostly on recruitment and retention and fails to look at what happens to the staff left behind after a colleague moves on (Belch & Mueller, 2003; Belch, Wilson, & Dunkel, 2009; Davidson, 2012). Understanding the effect of employee turnover on the remaining residence life staff is important because those staff members play key roles in student persistence and success (Belch & Mueller, 2003). The research questions examined how residence directors coped with the transition caused by the departure of their colleague. The theoretical framework that guided this exploratory study was Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2012) adult transition theory and their *4 S System for Coping* which described the four core variables that determine one's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided details on the residence directors' experiences with the departure. The eight participants who volunteered represented various housing and residence life departments within

universities that are members of the Southwest Association of College and University Housing Officials (SWACUHO) region. The data were coded using the *a priori* coding and the *4 S System for Coping*. The results of this study, through the lenses of situation, self, support, and strategies, suggested residence life departments that focus on communication, relationships, and supervisory support may be able to reduce costs, improve job satisfaction, reduce turnover, and increase productivity when an employee departure occurs.

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## DEDICATION

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Dating back to the 1990s, researchers have explored the value of living on campus because students' persistence is affected by where they live (e.g., Astin, 1999; Chiricosta, Work, & Anchors, 1996). Chiricosta et al. (1996) reported that students who live in on-campus residential communities have more frequent interactions with peers, which help them develop a sense of belonging to the institution. Living on campus also improves students' academic success because they tend to be more engaged with faculty and activities (De Arujo & Murray, 2010). As a result, residential students are more likely to obtain a degree than students who commute to campus (Astin, 1999). Belch and Mueller (2003) argued that it is the professional residence life staff, especially the residence directors, with their credentials, training, and experience, who provide a collaborative environment that fosters community development and enhances student learning.

Residence directors are entry-level, live-in, professional staff members who oversee the everyday functions of an on-campus residence hall or apartment community for between 100-1200 students. Their tasks include supervising student staff, resolving conflicts, supervising and advising community development efforts (such as resident programming or hall council), and ensuring the community's safety and security. Residence directors typically report to an area coordinator or assistance director within the department and assist by providing a supportive environment to promote student success. Though their responsibilities vary from institution to institution, quality residence directors are educators who provide opportunities for learning and development for their students and staff outside of the classroom (Horvath & Stack, 2013).

However, residence life programs face major challenges staffing and retaining residence directors (Blimling, 1993). The average length of employment for an entry-level residence director is three to five years (Jackson, Miller, Hyatt, & Yao, 2013; Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009), although some leave within the first year of employment (Belch & Mueller, 2003). Residence directors frequently leave due to quality-of-life issues; they work late hours, receive low pay, and live and work in a single environment with the students (Belch & Mueller, 2003). Often, universities compete for staff by increasing salaries and enhancing the live-in residence director apartments to include private entrances, washers and dryers, and upgraded flooring. Other competitive live-in benefits include allowing pets and domestic partners (Jackson et al., 2013).

Retaining residence directors is imperative to the success of a residence life program because they foster a positive educational environment for students and collaborate to accomplish departmental and university goals (Belch & Mueller, 2003). Teamwork is critical in the workforce and necessary for staff to complete complex goals (Dugan, 2017). Team-building promotes an understanding of staff roles and interdependence in the group which helps with communication, all of which improve team efficiency, reduce conflict, and promote collaboration (Winston & Creamer, 1997). In general, high-functioning groups have a meaningful level of cohesiveness (Northouse, 2012), which allows group members to share their feelings and opinions, give and receive honest and open feedback, address conflict, and work jointly toward group goals (Corey & Corey, 2006). Further, staff members “derive satisfaction from their work when they work with colleagues who are friendly, supportive, and collaborative” (Strayhorn, 2009, p. 159). According to Rosser and Javinar (2003), staff who foster positive relationships with their colleagues and units have greater job satisfaction and are more likely to be retained.

When a residence director leaves a position (whether because of poor institutional fit, job dissatisfaction, or attrition), the university loses significant resources, time, and money spent on the recruitment and hiring processes (Davidson, 2012; Renn & Hodges, 2007). In addition to those direct costs, indirect costs occur when other staff members are asked to take on additional responsibilities such as overseeing another community and staff or having more on-call evenings. Departmental productivity may decline due to the challenge of training other staff members to fill in the holes and take on the job tasks of the one that departed (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010). Other indirect costs are associated with the time that it takes to train the new staff members once they have been hired (Davidson, 2012).

While we know that turnover in the residence director position results in direct and indirect costs to both the residence life department and to students, we do not know or understand the implications of such a loss on the remaining residence hall staff. Jo posited (2008), “High turnover can shape the attitudes and behavior of those that remain, especially if the departing employee had a close relationship with the one left behind, in such a case, employee morale erodes” (p. 573). Jo also found that high turnover in the work environment can demoralize the employees who stay behind due to their increased workload and changes in job duties. The remaining staff may feel stress and anxiety caused by the uncertainty of how they will move forward without the departing staff member (Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009).

Research on residence directors, as well as on turnover in higher education in general, is limited (Janosik et al., 2003). The literature on residence directors has shortcomings in that it focuses mostly on recruitment and retention and fails to look at what happens to the staff left behind after a colleague moves on (Belch & Mueller, 2003; Belch, Wilson, & Dunkel, 2009; Davidson, 2012). Understanding the effect of employee turnover on the remaining residence life

staff is important because those staff members play key roles in student persistence and success. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on understanding residence directors' perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guided this exploratory study was Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2012) adult transition theory. Anderson et al. (2012) defined transition as "any event [anticipated or unanticipated] or nonevent [anticipated event that does not occur] that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). Adults in transition often know the issues troubling them but need assistance working through their issues to explore, understand, and cope with the new situation, role, or routine. The adult transition theory's *4 S System for Coping* was the primary theoretical framework used in this study.

The *4 S System for Coping* describes the four core variables that determine one's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. *Situation* is the event or issue at hand, which would be the departure of a colleague. *Self* is the individual experiencing the event, issue, or change. If a vacancy occurs in the residence director team, the residence directors will feel a direct impact of the departure. *Support* is provided by those who are available to help the individual(s) through the event. Residence directors may or may not rely on their remaining peers, supervisors, mentors, friends, or family members as sources of support. *Strategies* are the coping mechanisms available for the individual to use to process the event or issue. Residence directors may use various coping mechanisms to transition through the loss of a colleague (Anderson et al., 2012). The adult transition theory's *4 S System for Coping* theoretical framework was used as a guide to better understand the experience of remaining residence

directors coping with the departure of a colleague. This theoretical framework appropriately addressed the change and transition that the residence directors experienced. It also guided the research protocol and data analysis of the study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Residence directors play a significant role in the success of an on-campus housing program or department, and when those directors leave, the turnover costs, both direct and indirect, are significant (Allen et al., 2010). Rosser and Javinar (2003) found those costs to include “efficiency, consistency, and quality in the delivery of services, as well as the investment made in the knowledge base of the institution or unit” (p. 825). Regardless of the reasons for turnover, it disrupts staff teamwork, cohesion, and morale, which makes it harder if not impossible to successfully achieve university goals (Allen et al., 2010). The lack of staff cohesion can cause animosity within the staff group, which leads to fragmentation of the group (Corey & Corey, 2006). While costs and impact of turnover remain high, there is no research exploring residence directors’ perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on understanding residence directors’ perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues. This understanding will allow for best practices for residence life departments facing a staff departure, as well as minimizing other institutional costs associated with the turnover. This qualitative study looked at residence directors at four-year institutions who have experienced a departure of a coworker within the same academic year. Although researchers have examined residence directors’ recruitment and retention, this study is unique in that it examined the perceptions of the staff members who remained following the departure of a colleague.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What were the remaining residence directors' perceptions of a colleague's departure? (*Situation*)
2. How did the departure affect the remaining residence directors? (*Self*)
3. Who did the remaining residence directors turn to for assistance? (*Support*)
4. How did the residence directors deal with the change(s) after the departure of their colleague? (*Strategies*)

## **Methodology**

A qualitative study was conducted to understand residence directors' perceptions of the departure of their colleague using a phenomenological approach—a study that looks at the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is a flexible design that provides a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the situation being studied. The research findings are comprehensive and provide a rich description of experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A phenomenological study allowed for discussion of “the essence of the experience for individuals incorporating ‘what’ they have experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). This phenomenological strategy was used to tell a story of how residence directors felt after one of their colleagues departed from their position.

Residence directors employed at on-campus housing departments within the Southwest Association of College and University Housing Officers (SWACUHO) region were selected as participants by using criterion sampling. This purposeful sampling results in “cases that are likely to be information-rich with respect to the purposes of a qualitative study” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 178). Criterion sampling “involves the selection of cases that satisfy the important



criterion” (Gall et al., p. 179). The criterion sample was a minimum of six, and not more than 15, residence directors who were employed for one or more academic years and who had experienced the departure of a colleague during the previous year. Data saturation was used to determine a final sample size and was met at eight participants. Data saturation is “the point of data collection where the information you get becomes redundant” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Experienced residence directors were selected because they no longer were learning the responsibilities of their position and culture of their department and university. Also, experienced residence directors were more likely to have established relationships with the staff member who departed. Chief housing officers (CHOs) assisted with the identification of participants in the criterion sample.

Once the participants were selected, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. All interviews were digitally recorded for transcription. Interview questions were based on Anderson et al.’s adult transition theory (2012) and the literature review of residence director recruitment and retention (see Appendix D). Interview questions were open-ended and exploratory in nature. The recorded interviews were transcribed using a transcription service and coded using *a priori* coding.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are found in research studies and characterized as “systematic bias[es] that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the results” (Price & Murnan, 2004, p. 66). There were several limitations for this study. The first limitation was the lack of predictability on the response rate from the chief housing officers and participants. The chief housing officers who remained active on the SWACUHO listserv tended to be the ones who responded. A second limitation was related to technological challenges of

communicating with the participants. This was partly because all communication, except for the actual interviews, was completed via email. There was a lack of consistency with participant email communication. There was a 40% response rate for the residence directors who were emailed an invitation to participate. While several emails were sent, there were a variety of levels of response such as those that never responded, some that started the process but did not complete it, or others that took a long time to respond. The amount of time and follow-up needed for each participant varied, along with the technical difficulties associated with email communication. An instance of technical difficulty occurred when a participant indicated she never received the questionnaire, stating her university was known to have issues with receiving email correspondence (i.e. survey invitations) from Qualtrics. Troubleshooting resulted in a decision to forward an email containing the survey as opposed to being sent directly from Qualtrics. Another limitation was the way the residence director interviews were scheduled. Once the participants were emailed and provided with instructions, the researcher had to wait for the participants to self-select an interview time and email a pseudonym. Lastly, my role as a director of residence life and chief housing officers within the housing region in which the participants worked was a limitation. This may have created some hesitancy for the staff to answer openly and honestly due to the positional power within the reporting structure of the field and the possible relationships that I may or may not have with their director or chief housing officers. This was evident as several participants noted that even though they knew the study was confidential, they were concerned about people being aware of the information that they shared. The last limitation is the use of Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2012) Adult Transition Theory and the 4 S System for Coping as the theoretical framework. The 4 S System for Coping was a guiding factor for developing the research questions, protocol, coding, and themes. While

this theoretical framework was useful and provided a specific perspective, it is recommended that future researchers use a different lens to gain new insight on such an important topic.

### **Delimitations**

There were several key delimitations in this study, or “conscious exclusionary or inclusionary decisions made during the development of the study plan” (Simon & Goes, 2013, p. 274). The first was understanding the type of departure that occurred. Allen et al. (2010) found that there are three types of departure: voluntary and involuntary, dysfunctional and functional, and avoidable and unavoidable. This study looked at the fact that a departure occurred and did not look at why it happened or the type of departure. The second was that this study focused specially on the residence directors as a group of colleagues and did not include the assistant directors’ (supervisors’) or their resident assistants’ (subordinates’) perceptions. Lastly, the choice was made to utilize universities within the SWACUHO region for the criterion sample verses the entire ACUHO-I association. These delimitations were chosen for purpose of limiting the overall size and scope to make it a workable study for the researcher.

### **Assumptions**

There were several assumptions within this study. The first was that chief housing officers would choose to assist with the study without personal gain and that they would be successful identifying and sharing the names and email addresses of participants who met the criterion sample. However, this requirement was verified through the online questionnaire. Simon and Goes (2013) noted that “a qualitative researcher contends that reality is subjective and multiple as revealed through the perspective of the participants of the study” (p. 277). A second assumption was that residence directors would volunteer without compensation, and that while interviewing they would be truthful and forthcoming answering the researcher’s questions.

Participant confidentiality was addressed within the email invitation to participate in the study and the online questionnaire where participants were given a chance to give informed consent and permission to use anonymous quotes throughout the dissertation.

### **Personal Biography**

Machi and McEvoy (2012) noted that “personal attachment to an interest provides the passion and dedication necessary for conducting good research” (p. 19). With more than 20 years of professional experience in residence life, I experienced the departure of a colleague several times when I was a residence director. I remember taking on additional responsibilities such as committee work, emergency on-calls, and projects. I also watched several of my colleagues take on supervisory responsibilities of the remaining residence hall and student staff after one of our colleagues departed. I experienced firsthand the disruption to our team and challenges to overall morale. As director of the department, I have had several residence directors leave their positions through the years. In these cases, I was responsible for reducing the overall impact on the department and had to reassign job responsibilities and student staff supervision. Those departures occurred for many reasons, but, regardless of the circumstances, they created challenges for remaining staff.

For these reasons, I wanted to understand and recommend best practices for residence life staff who are left behind at the institution. I wanted to help residence life staff as they transitioned through the experience of losing a colleague. My experience and knowledge helped me understand the participants’ perceptions within this study. I also was curious to find out if others had the same feelings and experiences that I did when I experienced the departure of a colleague or staff member.

## Definitions of Terms

There are several acronyms and positions that are specific to the housing and residence life field and key definitions found in this study.

*ACUHO-I* — Association of Housing and University Housing Officers-International. Established in 1951, the international association is made up of housing and residence life professionals employed at college and universities throughout the world (“ACUHO-I,” n.d.).

*Chief Housing Officer [also known as Senior Housing Officer]*— The senior housing and residence life officer employed at each institution.

*Residence Director*— A full-time, often master’s level, university or college employee who is responsible for the daily operations (e.g., programming, supervision, student conduct) of an on-campus residence hall or apartment community within a housing and residence life department.

*Resident Assistants* — Upper class student employee’s and leaders who are responsible for the day to day engagement, student success, safety and security of residents living on a floor, building, or wing in an on-campus residence hall or apartment community within a housing and residence life department.

*SWACUHO* — Southwest Association of Housing and University Housing Officers. Established in 1966, the association is made up of housing and residence life professionals employed at college and universities within Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas (“SWACUHO,” n.d.).

*Turnover (departure)* — “the movement (as of goods or people) into, though, and out of a place” (“Turnover,” n.d.).

## Significance of the Study

This study was important because it attempted to fill a gap in the literature regarding what happens to the residence director staff who were left behind after a departure of a colleague. As noted, literature on residence directors focuses primarily on recruitment and retention (Belch & Mueller, 2003; Belch et al., 2009; Davidson, 2012). Previous researchers have not considered the staff members who remain at the institution. E. Glenn, corporate librarian for ACUHO-I, wrote in an email, “the question of how departures affect the remaining staff is a really interesting one, and I don’t think I have seen a study that looks at this specifically” (personal communication, August 9, 2017).

In this study, I explored how residence life programs spend their time, energy, and resources. Researchers have found that there are direct and indirect costs associated with staff departure (Allen et al., 2010; Davidson, 2012). This study attempted to explain those costs and allow for recommendations to reduce them by life guiding residence policies and practices. These policies and practices can range from staff supervision, staff development initiatives, and staff recruitment and training. An improved experience for the remaining staff may build team morale and increase job satisfaction, which can improve productivity and ultimately reduce further staff turnover.

The key findings from this study could also be used in other fields of higher education such as student affairs. Student affairs divisions, as well as other areas within higher education, work on teams where there is significant collaboration, communication, and turnover. This study is relevant to student affairs and other areas based on these shared experiences.

### **Summary**

Employee turnover can be especially significant in positions that require interaction among colleagues and in situations in which teamwork is essential (Ingersoll, 2003). This

exploratory study will attempt to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on understanding residence directors' perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues. This understanding will allow for best practices for residence life departments facing a staff departure, as well as minimizing other institutional costs associated with the turnover.

The following sections include Chapter 2, an overview of literature relevant to the topic; Chapter 3, the methodology and how this study was conducted; Chapter 4, the rich findings; and lastly, Chapter 5, the discussion and conclusions and recommendations further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this exploratory study was to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on understanding residence directors' perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues. This qualitative study looked at residence directors at four-year institutions who have experienced a departure of a coworker within the same academic year. Although previous studies have examined residence directors' recruitment and retention, this study is unique in that it examined the perceptions of the staff who remained following the departure of a colleague. There has been limited research on residence directors, and that research focused specifically on recruitment and retention (Belch & Mueller, 2003; Belch, Wilson, & Dunkel, 2009; Davidson, 2012). The following literature review explores research on attrition of staff in residence life, student affairs, higher education, and management, along with several aspects of job satisfaction such as communication, professional development, supervision, morale, and teamwork. It also includes a review of research on organizational change, the pilot study that was performed prior to this study on the topic, as well as a review of additional research that used the selected theoretical framework for this study, Anderson et al.'s (2012) adult transition theory and the *4 S System for Coping*. An attempt was made to find relevant research to this study including a meeting with the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies librarian at The University of Texas at Arlington and email communication with the ACUHO-I librarian. A list of key search terms is included for reference (See Appendix A).

#### **Attrition**

Literature regarding the appropriate way to voluntarily leave or resign from a professional position is limited. The National Association for Student Personnel (NASPA),



American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) professional standards provided general guidelines regarding responsible and ethical departures. These guidelines are important because they help staff understand the impact leaving a position has on their future careers and on the institution and staff they leave behind. How one leaves is often just as important as the entire tenure of the employment (Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009).

Focusing on residence life, Belch and Mueller (2003) completed a quantitative study of 516 senior housing officers regarding the challenges and trends of recruiting residence directors. They administered a survey and found that when choosing a career, graduate students interested in higher education administration often chose positions in student affairs instead of residence life due to the perceived demanding and difficult lifestyle and quality of life of live-in residence directors. Residence directors often experience late-night disruptions and find it difficult to live and work in the same environment as the students. However, the residence director position is a key entry point for future student affairs professionals.

Given the limited number of senior student affairs administrator positions, practitioners often base their decisions about whether to remain in the field on the perceived likelihood that they would reach one of the highest positions (Lorden, 1998). Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, and Lowery (2016) conducted a study of 153 former student affairs professionals who left the field within the past 10 years to determine the factors that contributed to their departure and to better understand their decisions. The researchers administered a mixed-method survey design with open-ended, Likert-style, and descriptive questions. Marshall et al. (2016) found that “significant concerns do exist about the quality of professional life for many student affairs professionals” (p. 158). They found that their participants left the field due to excessive hours and burnout, non-

competitive salaries, attractive career alternatives, work-life conflict, limited opportunities for promotion, role of supervisor and institutional fit, lack of challenge, and loss of .

Kortegast and Hamrick (2009) completed a qualitative study looking at voluntary departures of student affairs professionals at small colleges and universities. The senior researcher conducted phone interviews with 20 participants who departed their student affairs position at a small college or university and had experience supervising a minimum of one staff member. They found four key themes common to successful voluntary departures. First, the departing staff provided sufficient and advanced notice to their supervisor prior to the departure. Second, the departing staff member had previous conversations with their supervisor regarding career goals and advancement. Third, the departing staff member planned for their departure by completing any outstanding tasks and projects. Finally, the departing staff member utilized their supervisor as a resource and mentor during their job search process. They found that the departing staff member's relationship changed with their supervisor and colleagues after the announcement of their departure, especially when they provided little-to-no notice that they were leaving, this was because they felt that they let their supervisor and remaining staff down.

Rosser and Javinar (2003) led a national quantitative study of 1,166 student affairs leaders "to measure the quality of midlevel leaders' work life, their satisfaction and morale, and whether they intend to stay or leave the field" (p. 4). The researchers noted, "these student affairs professionals value, more than the other work life issues, the importance of fostering positive relationships with those they interact with; more specifically, they enjoy building positive relationships with colleagues within and between work units" (p. 11). They concluded that the two most important factors affecting staff departures were their years of service working at the

institution and their salary level. While staff with more years of service and higher salaries had a reduced sense of morale, they were more likely to remain at their institution.

Jo (2008) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate if workplace policies and practices contributed to job dissatisfaction and subsequent turnover of female higher education staff. The study analyzed variation in university departments ranging from student affairs to financial managers and alumni affairs professionals for attrition rates and the factors that contributed to the voluntary turnover among midlevel women administrators. The researcher conducted interviews and a questionnaire. Out of the 46 respondents who had departed a large private university, 30 were selected based on their former position on campus. Jo used market-based theory of voluntary turnover as her conceptual framework: when the economy is strong and there are many jobs available, people are more likely to leave their positions. When the economy is tight, people are less likely to leave their positions. Jo found that three key areas affect the voluntary turnover process: supervisory skills, growth opportunities, and flexible work/life policies. However, in contrast to Rosser and Javinar (2003), Jo found that most respondents reported that they left because of a poor relationship with their immediate supervisor.

Turnover is not unique to higher education. Allen, Bryant, and Vardaman (2010) provided evidence-based retention information to replace misconceptions about workplace turnover. This meta-analysis focused on studies regarding turnover and highlighted five turnover misconceptions such as, “all turnover is the same, and it is all bad” or “people quit because of pay” (Allen et al., 2010, p. 49). They found that the relationship one has with his/her supervisor is important along with workgroup cohesion and coworker satisfaction. They noted “organizations that foster a supportive and cohesive culture may realize improved retention” (p.

54). The authors highlighted seven evidence-based human resource management strategies to reduce turnover: recruitment, selection, socialization, training and development, compensation and rewards, supervision, and engagement. These studies showed the growing research base on attrition of staff in residence life, student affairs, higher education, and management and the lack of research on those who remain in their positions. The next section will explore research conducted on several areas of job satisfaction such as communication, professional development, supervision, morale, and teamwork.

### **Job Satisfaction**

When professional staff establish the proper tone, direction, and expectations for students and staff who live in the community, housing programs can be successful (Winston, Anchors, & Associates, 1993). Winston et al. (1993) noted, “regardless of type of residential facilities, campus, or student body, it is the staff that usually makes the ultimate difference in the quality and impact of the housing program” (p. 186). When the residence life staff is a cohesive, collaborative unit with high job satisfaction, there tends to be less turnover and absenteeism (Davidson, 2012), and their positive impact, as noted by Winston et al., can be realized.

Belch, Wilson, and Dunkel (2009) led a qualitative study of 75 residence life professional staff at all levels of the organization through individual and group interviews. The purpose was to understand the best practices for residence director recruitment and retention. They found that residence director staff were more successful in environments that had a high level of organizational culture of communication, engagement, professionalism, and support. They noted:

new professionals that were retained . . . spoke about high job satisfaction due to their sense of autonomy and responsibility, a strong professional and personal fit in an enjoyable environment, good supervision, effective communication and access

throughout the organization, a strong network of support in the department and on campus, vibrant professional development opportunities and support for them, and chances for promotion within the department or strong preparation for advancement at another institution. (Belch et al., 2009, p. 9)

Davidson (2012) conducted a quantitative study with 118 entry-level residence directors using the Job in General Scale (JIG) and the Job Descriptive Index (JDI). The researcher found that staff were satisfied with their residence life work and reported that they found it enjoyable and rewarding. She indicated that co-workers were important to the retention of staff and that supervisors should help foster these relationships. Davidson also found that residence director satisfaction and retention were greatest when staff fully understood the nature of the work at a specific institution, had the ability for professional advancement, could expand their collegial relationships, and were allowed clear, open communication regarding remuneration.

Barham and Winston (2006) completed a qualitative study examining supervision of new professionals in student affairs. They conducted interviews with four new professionals and their supervisors. They found that the supervision of new professionals influenced staff satisfaction and retention, noting that “their (new professionals) primary source of support and understanding rests in the hands of their supervisor” (p. 87). Supervisors tend to supervise the way they personally like to be supervised. Satisfaction of staff increases when the supervision preferences match the supervisor and the supervisee. In other words, supervisors with more experience are better able to identify ways in which to develop new professionals.

When faced with significant number of new professionals in one institution, residence life supervisors must provide their staff professional development opportunities to be successful in their current positions and assist them with moving up (Henning, Cilente, Kennedy, & Sloane,

2011). Henning et al. conducted a web-based quantitative study surveying 126 new residence life staff to determine their professional development needs. They found that entry-level staff were more likely to be retained if they had staff development in areas that included “supervision skills, fostering student learning, developing multicultural competencies, and understanding institutional culture” (p. 34). They also found that with these areas of development, staff would have higher morale, confidence, and competence in their work.

However, while the supervisor’s role is important, Renn and Hodges (2007) found that the residence life staff can do much to enhance their own work experience. The researchers conducted a qualitative study of 10 new student affairs professionals over their first year of employment. They gathered data regarding their experiences, challenges, and any surprises that they encountered. They found that staff must take the initiative to find the balance between their work and personal life, find mentors other than their supervisor, establish relationships with their peers, and enhance their own experiences as new professionals (Renn & Hodges, 2007).

Davis and Cooper (2017) conducted a study to explore how supervisors in student affairs narrate their experiences of supervising new professionals. The researchers also sought to understand the experiences and circumstances supervisors believe shape the way they work with new professionals. Conducting a qualitative study using network and criterion sampling to narrow their participants to 13 and through a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, they articulated three main factors important to the success of the new professional. The first factor was the context of the supervision, such as proximity of offices, demographics of both the supervisor and supervisee, and the past supervisory experience of the supervisor. The second factor was the evaluation of supervision or the constant process in which the supervisor evaluates the performance of the new professional and the development of their

supervisor/supervisee relationship. The third factor was the deliberate process the supervisor used to supervise the new professional such as training and one-on-one meetings.

Saunders, Cooper, Winston, and Chernow (2000) led a study looking for mode of effective supervision in student affairs. The researchers conducted a quantitative study of 380 student affairs professionals from 15 different universities. Their participants' data were gathered in two different collection groups. They used the Synergistic Supervision Scale (SSS) to look at how staff perceived their current relationship with their supervisor, and the Index of Organizational Reaction (IOR) and the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) to validate the SSS. The researchers found that due to the increased communication, performance appraisals, and feedback, synergistic supervision is an effective supervisory model that can be used within student affairs. They also found that the SSS could be used to find areas of training and improvement to increase effective supervision.

According to Tull (2006), "Effective supervision of new professionals is one way that the profession [student affairs] can reduce the propensity of new professionals to leave" (p. 465). Tull conducted a quantitative study focusing on the relationship between synergistic supervision and job satisfaction, gender, race and length of relationship. The 435 student affairs professionals identified as members of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) completed the Synergistic Supervision Scale (SSS) and the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (MOAQ). The SSS was used to look at how staff perceived their current relationship with their supervisor and the MOAQ was used to measure job satisfaction and the intent to turnover. The researcher found that there was a positive correlation between job satisfaction and synergistic supervision and gender apart from male/male supervisor/supervisee situation. The researcher also found a negative correlation between the intent to leave and synergistic supervision. Tull's results

showed that supervisors who use a synergistic supervisory style are more likely to be satisfied with their job and less like to leave.

Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, and Gregory (2005) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the phenomenon of personal and professional balance among 24 student affairs educators who were nominated by their colleagues because they exemplified personal and professional balance. The authors found there are four key components of balance. The first is self-knowledge (identifying what areas or things in your life are important). The second component of balance is intentionality (the ability to decide what you are going to do and make choices). The third is commitment to self-care (deciding to put yourself first). Last is reflection (being intentional in taking the time to think about yourself). They found that personal and professional balance vary from person to person and that there are internal and external factors that affect and challenge one's ability to achieve balance.

## **Morale**

According to Merriam-Webster, a general definition of morale is “the mental and emotional condition (as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty) of an individual or group with regard to the function or tasks at hand” (“Morale,” n.d.). Johnsrud, Heck, and Rosser (2000) found difficulty defining “morale” and noted the scarce empirical data associated with it. They conducted a quantitative study of 869 higher education midlevel administrators using a scale to determine their morale and intent to leave their position. They found that “midlevel administrator morale is determined by their perceptions that they are treated fairly, that they and their opinions are valued, and that their work is meaningful” (p. 54). They also found that while morale varies individually and within a group, as well as across an institution, there are several work-life issues that institutions can address that are important, including “the quality of their relationships with



their supervisor and others, the opportunities for available for career development and advancement, and the recognition for work well done” (p. 54).

While a high level of morale is important in higher education, Shaukat, Yousaf, and Sanders (2017) conducted a study to investigate the consequences of conflict on team performance, contextual performance, and turnover intentions in the business sector. Shaukat, Yousaf, and Sanders (2017) conducted a quantitative study with a random sample of 306 telecom supervisors and engineers in Pakistan. The researchers used the loss principal of Conservation of Resources (COR), a theory that says, “individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect and foster things they value” (p. 5). The theory also notes that once you have a loss of resources, the loss will continue and negatively impact individuals. The researchers found that “a loss of social relationships gives rise to other losses and these loss spirals are accompanied by loss of cognitive resources, energy resources and social resources” (p. 16). They also found a significant negative relationship between relationship conflict and task performance/contextual performance and a significant positive relationship between relationship conflict and turnover intentions.

### **Organizational Change**

Change is constant within student affairs and higher education. Dickerson (2001) investigated student affairs administrator’s perceptions of organizational change using a quantitative design to survey 144 participants including three levels of student affairs administrators. The Likert-style survey looked at the planning, implementation, and evaluation of organizational change. The researcher found that there was a difference in how the three levels of administrators viewed planning and implementing organizational change. Dickerson also found that communication and feedback was impactful and needed as a means to engage student affairs administrators and reduce overall resistance to change.

Organizational change occurs in the corporate world, higher education, and elsewhere. Lumadi and Mampuru (2010) looked at the change models used in the corporate world and adjusted them to focus on managing change within student affairs. They found that “change within student affairs can be approached from a communication and participation perspective” (p. 727). The researchers developed a five-stage change process for student affairs professionals that keeps key individuals informed about the change and allows them to participate within the process. This student affairs specific change process increases the likelihood of success and reduces resistance.

Lucas and Kline (2008) conducted a case study “to investigate the relationship between organizational culture, group dynamics, and organizational learning in the context of organizational change” (p. 277). They used a variety of data gathering techniques including observations, semi-structured interviews, field notes, and other documents. Their participants were EMS, fire officers, and protective services managers from a municipality. They identified the following elements as key to organizational learning: trust, psychological contracts, occupational cultures, leadership, and group processes. Specifically, Lucas and Kline (2008) concluded the prerequisite to organizational change is “the need to be aware of the characteristics unique to the organization and its culture” (p. 286).

A study of 832 faculty members from a Dutch university was conducted by Hetty van Emmerik, Bakker, and Euwema (2009) to “examine the relationship between job demands and resources on one hand, and employees’ evaluations of organizational change on the other hand” (p. 594). The researchers conducted their study using a five-point rating scale for their participants to rate their agreement regarding their evaluation of organizational change for eight related statements. The responses were coded for the areas of job and emotional demands and job

resources. The researchers found that the job resources, such as supervisor support or professional development, were positively related to organizational change, whereas job and emotional demands were negatively related to organizational change. The researchers were not surprised by their findings in that the more resources that an individual had, the more positive they felt about the change.

Rather than focusing on organizational change outcomes, Foster (2010) conducted a study that focused on individual commitment to organizational change including resistance and organizational justice. The purpose was to “gain a better understanding of individual responses to organizational change and to learn more about what components of change implementation relate to successful organizational change” (p. 5). The researcher conducted a quantitative study of 218 staff recruited from three U.S. organizations, one healthcare, Fortune 500, and one biotech companies. The researcher used web-based questionnaires to gather data; the Resistance to Change Scale (RTCS) was used to measure resistance to change, the Colquitt’s 20-item scale was used to measure organizational justice, and the Herscovitch and Meyer commitment to change scale (CTCS) was used to measure commitment to change. Foster (2010) found that:

employees who perceived high levels of fairness associated with an organization change were more likely to want to be committed to the change (affective), more likely to feel they ought to be committed to the change (normative), and less likely to be committed to the change because of perceived costs (continuance). (p. 31)

Foster also found little relationship with resistance and commitment to change, noting further research, including evaluating the usage of the word “resistance” due to its negative connotation, needs to be reviewed.

Alase (2017) believes that there are too many organizational change models and that most are not grounded in theory and research. The researcher wrote a review paper to analyze organizational change theories in an effort to simplify them. Alase's review examined the types of organizational change theories and their usage in the education setting, as well as types of organizational leadership. Due to this examination and analysis, the researcher felt that the organizational change theories reviewed were "well-researched and proven theories that are practicable and workable" (p. 213) and that those making changes could utilize the analysis to better select their organizational change theory.

These studies are all examples of research on attrition, job satisfaction such as communication, professional development, supervision, morale, and teamwork, as well as research on organizational change. These studies show the growing research base on attrition, job satisfaction, and organizational change and the lack of research on the impact of turnover on those who remain in their positions. The next sections will explore a pilot study conducted on the topic as well as research that has used the theoretical framework proposed for this study.

### **Pilot Study**

A small pilot study was conducted for this research in spring 2017 in a residence life program at a large, public university. The qualitative study, using in face-to-face interviews, included three residence director participants. All participants had been employed at the university for two or more years and experienced the departure of one of their colleagues. The key findings were that relationships, job satisfaction, transition, and timing are areas of importance when a staff member departs their position. Strong personal and professional relationships among remaining staff helped them navigate the transition. As far as job satisfaction, the departure of the staff member seriously damaged department morale because the

remaining staff assumed additional duties. The transition of the departing staff member was eased for the remaining residence directors through the support of coworkers and supervisors. Lastly, the timing of the departure was a reason for much of the disruption, as it was early in the semester when responsibilities were just beginning.

The pilot study was significant because it allowed for testing of the theoretical framework. In other words, the pilot study allowed the researcher the ability “to develop an understanding of the concepts and theories held by the people you are studying” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 67). However, it also allowed for the exploration of the topic. It supported the need for future research by identifying themes and key findings. Furthermore, it showed a need for a larger study as well as reinforced that the theoretical framework selected is appropriate for the future study.

## **Theory**

Anderson et al. (2012) adult transition theory’s *4 S System for Coping* describes the four core variables that determine one’s ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. *Situation* is the event or issue at hand. *Self* is the individual experiencing the event, issue, or change. *Support* is provided by those who are available to help the individual(s) through the event. *Strategies* are the coping mechanisms available for the individual to use to process the event or issue. Several recent studies focused on student or staff transitions in the higher education setting use Anderson et al.’s adult transition theory as their theoretical framework. Thus, they will be used in this section due to their relevance to the theoretical perspective and setting proposed in this study.

While Kortegast and Hamrick’s (2009) qualitative study that looked at voluntary departures of student affairs professionals at small colleges and universities was examined earlier in this literature review, the researchers used Anderson et al.’s (2012) adult transition theory and

the *4 S System for Coping*, as well as Winston and Creamer's (1997) synergistic supervision model as their theoretical frameworks. They used the *4 S System for Coping* as a method to frame the staff departure process and found that the *situation* was influenced by the quality of the departing staff member's relationship with the supervisor. The *self* was one's ability to manage the departure process. The *support* was felt when departing staff members had a relationship with their supervisor in which they could be open and share job search plans. Lastly, the *strategies* were when supervisors could plan for a successful departure. The researchers found that aspects of transition, such as departure, reinforced the theoretical framework.

McCoy (2014) conducted a qualitative study to explore the transition of eight first-generation college students of color beginning at a predominantly white institution. She found that first-generation college students of color at the predominately white institution experienced transitional challenges. She framed these transitions using Anderson et al.'s (2012) *4 S System for Coping*. She noted *self* as they worked through challenges of familial expectations with the college experience, *situation* as they experienced the difficulties with admissions process and the culture shock, and, lastly, *support/strategies* when they used campus resources such as multicultural affairs.

Zhang (2016) conducted a qualitative study to understand the transition of Chinese doctoral students in a U. S. research university. The researcher held focus-group interviews and took field notes with 10 mainland Chinese students in their own language, Mandarin Chinese. The researcher found that Chinese doctoral students have unique experiences and that they have transition issues that include being an ESL learner, having tensions in their relationships, and experiencing changes in their self-identity. The researcher found that *situation* was the academically prepared Chinese doctoral students' difficulty with transition outside of the

academic realm such as peer relationships and balancing their academic and personal lives. *Self* was the positive feelings of confidence that came from being a mature, responsible international student. *Support* was a challenge as they felt alone and isolated, away from their family support system while trying to establish a local support system. *Strategies* were using existing support systems and academic resources, as well as improving their English skills as ways to ease the transition.

Griffin and Gilbert (2015) explored the successful transition of veterans into higher education. They conducted individual and focus group interviews with 28 students and 72 institutional representatives. The main findings of the study were that veterans have three areas of need when it comes to successfully transitioning at an institution. The first was *personnel and services* (university offices, services, and professionals to meet and understand veterans' unique issues). The second was *institutional structures* (the need for specific university policies and procedures at each institution when processing information, benefits, and services), and lastly, *social and cultural support* (the need for veterans to have personal relationships with peers and personnel on campus). The researchers found that for *situation*, veterans need to navigate the nuances of being a veteran at a university. *Self* was the realization that campuses have a difficult time providing resources to veterans who often do not self-identify. With *support*, they found a varying degree of what the veterans needed and wanted, especially when looking at peer social engagement. Lastly, for *strategies*, they found that veterans who had visited a campus veterans' office were the most successful in the college transition.

These studies illustrate the use of Anderson et al.'s (2012) adult transition theory and the *4 S System for Coping* in research conducted on transitional experiences in higher education.

These studies demonstrate how the adult transition theory and the *4 S System for Coping* can be

used in the higher education setting. They also show how this study will contribute to this theory-based body of literature.

### **Summary**

This literature review demonstrated that there has been limited research on residence directors, and the research that has been conducted focuses specifically on recruitment and retention. Relevant research explored attrition in residence life, student affairs, higher education, and management, along with several aspects of job satisfaction such as communication, professional development, supervision, morale, and teamwork. It included a review of research on organizational change. It also included a review of the pilot study that was performed on the topic, as well as additional research that used the selected theoretical framework for this study, Anderson et al.'s (2012) adult transition theory. This literature review showed the complexity of residence director recruitment and retention and confirmed the need for my study to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on understanding residence directors' perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues. It can also be used to support the usage of Anderson et al.'s adult transition theory and the *4 S System for Coping* in research conducted on transitional experiences in higher education. This study will allow for best practices for residence life departments facing a staff departure, as well as minimizing other institutional costs associated with the turnover.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this exploratory study was to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on understanding residence directors' perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues. This qualitative study looked at residence directors at four-year institutions who had experienced a departure of a coworker within the same academic year. Although researchers have examined residence directors' recruitment and retention (Belch & Mueller, 2003; Belch, Wilson, & Dunkel, 2009; Davidson, 2012), this study was unique in that it examined the perceptions of the staff members who remained or were left behind at the institution.

When conducting a study, Maxwell (2013) noted that researchers must understand their goals and what motivates them to study a specific topic. Maxwell believed in the importance of finding a topic that integrates personal and practical goals as well as the researcher's experiences so that they can stay motivated and justify their work. The personal and practical goals of this study were to understand residence directors' perceptions of the departure of their colleague to establish policies and procedures that can provide an improved experience for the remaining staff in order to build team morale and increase job satisfaction, which can improve productivity and ultimately reduce further staff turnover.

A qualitative research study was selected as the method of research because it is a flexible design that provides a deeper, more thorough and complex understanding of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2013). A benefit of qualitative research is "understanding the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved with or engage in" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30). Qualitative research can be a rigorous and time-consuming process; however, the research findings are comprehensive and provide a rich

description of the situation being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013). It is important to note that for this study, a quantitative approach would not have allowed for the exploration of the residence directors' feelings and perceptions regarding the departure of their colleague. A quantitative design would have missed the uniqueness of the individual participants that was captured through the qualitative design (Creswell 2013). Thus, a qualitative design was a better fit for the study conducted.

More specifically, this study employed a phenomenological approach—a type of qualitative study that looks at the common lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2013). This type of approach was selected because it aligned with the goals of the study and the common lived experience residence directors shared when they were faced with the departure of one of their colleagues. Creswell wrote,

The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon. (p. 31)

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) shared that “researchers in phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events or interactions to ordinary people in particular events” (p. 25). A phenomenological approach allows for discussion of “the essence of the experience for individuals incorporating ‘what’ they have experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). A phenomenological approach also allows for the researcher to tell a story of their participants' experiences. This approach provides a voice to the participants by using direct quotes and their own words (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013). For this

study, it is a detailed story about how the residence directors' felt after the departure of their colleague.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What were the remaining residence directors' perceptions of a colleague's departure? (*Situation*)
2. How did the departure affect the remaining residence directors? (*Self*)
3. Who did the remaining residence directors turn to for assistance? (*Support*)
4. How did the residence directors deal with the change(s) after the departure of their colleague? (*Strategies*)

### **Procedures**

In what follows, research procedures are detailed, including separate sections for the site, sample, data collection, and data analysis. The section concludes with steps I took to ensure trustworthiness.

#### **Site**

The site varied due to this study's participant selection process. An email requesting assistance with identifying potential participants was sent to the chief housing officers (CHOs) who represented the 85 Southwest Association of College and University Housing Officers (SWACUHO) member institutions (see Appendix C). To be considered an interview site, the residence life department must have had a residence director vacancy during the past academic year and have identified residence directors who met the sample criteria. Once participants expressed interest in volunteering to be a part of the study, a demographic questionnaire was emailed to the potential participants to gather data regarding intuition and staff size to provide

context for the multiple sites (see Appendix D). The final interview sites included participants from five large public universities all from one single southwestern state. Unfortunately, there were no responses from the chief housing officers from the other two SWACUHO regional states.

## **Sample**

Residence directors employed at on-campus housing departments within the SWACUHO region were selected as participants by using criterion sampling. This represented purposeful sampling or “cases that are likely to be information-rich with respect to the purposes of a qualitative study” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 178). They went on to note that criterion sampling “involves the selection of cases that satisfy the important criterion” (p. 179). Creswell (2013) shared that when exploring a phenomenon, the size of the sample or group of individuals who have a shared experience can range from three to 15. The criterion sample goal for this study was set at a minimum of six, and not more than 15 residence directors who were employed for one or more academic years and who had experienced the departure of a colleague during the previous year. Experienced residence directors were selected because they no longer were learning the responsibilities of their position and culture of their department and university. Also, experienced residence directors were more likely to have established relationships with the staff member who departed. As noted, SWACUHO chief housing officers helped identify participants in the criterion sample by providing the researcher with a list of names and emails of potential participants. Seven chief housing officers responded to the emails, two of which indicated that they did not have anyone who met the criteria. The remaining five chief housing officers responded with a total of 19 possible residence director names and email addresses. One

residence director was excluded as they did not meet the minimum requirement of working at their university for at least one year.

Once the list of 18 participants was finalized, the potential participants were sent an email informing them of the study and inviting them to participate (see Appendix E). A communication spreadsheet was created to monitor the status of each of the 18 invited participants within the study. Of the 18 invited, eight responded that they wanted to volunteer to participate in the study. The eight potential participants were emailed a demographic and informed consent questionnaire through the online survey system, Qualtrics (see Appendix D). Once the participants completed the Qualtrics questionnaire, they were sent another email with the necessary instructions to set up a time for a Skype video conference call. An online sign-up form called Signup Genius was used to allow participants several options for interview times. They self-selected their time by using pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity. Anonymity was maintained by not including any personal identifiers throughout the study. Data saturation was used to determine a final sample size and was met at eight participants. Data saturation is "the point of data collection where the information you get becomes redundant" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.69). Data saturation became apparent when the participants shared their feelings regarding how they felt when their colleague departed, the workload distribution, and who helped them with the transition.

Table 3.1 provides the demographic data for each participant using their chosen pseudonym. There were an equal number of male and female participants in the study. There was also a mixture of master's and bachelor's level staff members as well as a varying length of employment. The most common aspect within the sample was the length of time that they knew the individual who departed, which averaged approximately one year.

Table 3.1

*Residence Director Participant Demographic Data*

Name	Gender	Education	Experience	Length of time they knew the departed
Lauren	F	Master's degree	10 years	Two years, one mo.
Rob	M	Master's degree	Four years	One year
Ashley	F	Master's degree	Four years	One year, 10 mo.
Tricia	F	Bachelor's Degree	Nine years	One year
Dustin	M	Master's degree	Four years	One year
Belkas	M	Master's degree	Seven years	One year
Bruce	M	Bachelor's Degree	Four years	Three years
Natalie	F	Master's degree	Two years, 10 mo.	11 months

**Data Collection**

According to Creswell (2013), “Phenomenology can involve a streamlined form of data collection by including only single or multiple interviews with participants” (p. 82). For this study, data were collected through semi-structured, Skype interviews with each of the eight participants. Interviews were conducted in the researcher’s office using a laptop. The participants were located in their offices with the exception of Lauren who used her residential apartment. The interviews lasted between 17 and 48 minutes. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher attempted to establish rapport by thanking the participant for taking part in the interview and confirming the length of time they had known the colleague who had departed. The participants were asked 11 questions, not including several probes and follow-up questions (see Appendix A). Interview questions and probes were open ended and exploratory in nature and were based on Anderson et al.’s (2012) adult transition *4 S Theory of Coping* and the

literature review of residence director recruitment and retention. Interview probes were used to have the participants clarify and be more specific when answering the questions. Interview probes were also used to have participants expand on their responses and provide greater meaning to their story (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The interview questions asked were the same used in the spring 2017 pilot study. The interviews were digitally recorded using a handheld recording device and Apple Voice Memos as a backup. Descriptive field notes were taken after each interview to capture the general themes and experiences of the residence directors as related to the departure of their colleague, as well as a description of the participant and their body language. (No follow up interviews were conducted.

### **Data Analysis**

The digital recordings were transcribed using an online transcription service. A transcript is a “written translation of an audio-recorded interview or fieldnotes” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 275). The transcriptions received from the service were reviewed line by line and edited by the researcher for accuracy. Once the transcriptions were finalized, the interviews were emailed to each participant to member check or rule out any misinterpretations in the transcribed data (Maxwell, 2013). Once all data were verified, they were coded using *a priori* coding where “the categories are established prior to the analysis based on some theory” (Stemler, 2001, p. 4). For this study, Anderson et al.’s (2012) adult transition theory *4 S System for Coping* (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) was used to structure the participants’ responses. Interview transcriptions were systematically examined for each of the *4 S System for Coping* strategies, and data were grouped on separate spreadsheets for further development. The grouping were situation, self, support, strategies, and conclusions. Once all interviews were reviewed and comments were

moved to the spreadsheets, the data were structured to provide a rich, thick description of the residence directors' experiences.

### **Trustworthiness**

This study employed four steps to ensure trustworthiness, or according to Creswell (2013) “an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the research and the participants” (p. 249). First was the acknowledgement of my personal bias. My current role as a director of Apartment and Residence Life created the opportunity for researcher bias and premature conclusions (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). I also acknowledged that my current role as a director may have influenced the participants' responses because of the unspoken power imbalance between the residence director and director roles. Aware of these potential issues of bias and power, I let participants know that they did not have to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. I also informed them that they could contact me via email if they had any concerns about the study or further information they wanted to share. The second area of trustworthiness involved the interview protocol. Prior to the interview, the interview questions were reviewed by several of my professors and the university's Instructional Review Board (IRB) for trustworthiness, given their extensive expertise in developing and asking qualitative questions. This input helped identify questions that needed to be added, adjusted, or removed. The third factor employed was member checking by emailing the transcription of the interview to the participants, so they could verify its accuracy and make any corrections (Maxwell, 2013; Simon & Goes, 2013). Another form of member checking was the peer review conducted by a seasoned director of housing and residence life who reviewed the study and findings. He provided feedback and suggestions utilizing his 25 years of extensive residence life experience.



The last factor of trustworthiness in this study was the rich, thick description within my findings. This rich, thick data allowed for the transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2013).

### **Summary**

This chapter contained a review of why a qualitative approach was employed for this study, as well as the multiple steps taken through this phenomenological study such as the site selection, participant sample, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness in order to understand residence directors' perceptions of a departure of a colleague. These qualitative measures were followed to gather and analyze the data to tell the story of residence directors' experiences. The rich, thick description of the findings are shared in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) shared that “researchers in phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events or interactions to ordinary people in particular events” (p. 25). It was through this phenomenological mode of research that a story could be told about the lived experiences of the residence directors perceptions of the departure of a colleague, often using their own words to give the participants a voice (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

#### Participants

Table 4.1

*Residence Director Participant Demographic Data*

Name	Gender	Education	Experience	Length of time they knew the departed
Lauren	F	Master’s degree	10 years	Two years, one mo.
Rob	M	Master’s degree	Four years	One year
Ashley	F	Master’s degree	Four years	One year, 10 mo.
Tricia	F	Bachelor’s Degree	Nine years	One year
Dustin	M	Master’s degree	Four years	One year
Belkas	M	Master’s degree	Seven years	One year
Bruce	M	Bachelor’s Degree	Four years	Three years
Natalie	F	Master’s degree	Two years, 10 mo.	11 months

Each of the eight participants had their own unique background and story. The first participant, Lauren, worked at a large institution split up into several areas of residence director teams across their campus. She felt closer to her own unit than the entire team. With her 10 years of residence experience, she believed that some of the work she was doing was outdated and that

overall the staff team felt overworked. She was close with the individual who departed because they shared the same interests. They worked together for approximately two years and one month. They were assigned to the same committee and shared similar perspectives related to social justice and advocacy. She was sad when her colleague departed because of their friendship outside of work and their time collaborating at the university. Lauren's work significantly changed after the departure of her colleague. She was asked to take on the oversight of an additional residence hall. This meant she would have two staff teams and communities that she was responsible for overseeing. Lauren was much more reserved and did not ask for help as she did not want to appear to be weak or incapable of doing the job. However, she was concerned with the lack of compensation for the additional work that she was responsible for and was eventually advocated for and given supplementary compensation.

Rob, a fourth-year residence director, shared that he lost two residence directors within the past year, both had been at the university for approximately one year. He was much closer, professionally and personally, with the residence director that worked in the residence halls alongside of him versus the apartment communities. Due to their personal relationship, Rob was less surprised about the departure of the staff member that he had a relationship with. He was surprised about the other colleague departing their position as he was unaware that they were job searching. His workload did not take on any significant changes. However, he was mostly concerned with the high turnover and the assessment of the position as to what could be done to prevent staff leaving in the future. He felt comfortable talking with his supervisor regarding his thoughts and concerns. He also felt that his experience with turnover at a previous institution helped him with the departures.

Ashley lost her mentor whom she worked with for just under two years when her colleague departed his position. She was a fourth-year residence director at her university and her colleague had several years of experience at multiple universities. He provided her with guidance on career mapping, progressing in the field, and networking. She had mixed feelings about him leaving because she was excited for him. However, she was aware of and concerned about the additional responsibilities that she would be required to take on due to his departure. She was also sad to be losing a friend and mentor. Ashley was asked to move to a new residence hall community, the same one that her colleague had worked at and was adored. This required her to start over with a new staff and residents. She did not feel that she received enough support from her supervisor and the department, rather she found encouragement from her spouse. Ashley indicated that the departure and transition had a significant impact on her emotionally and she wanted to make sure others were aware of emotional toll a departure could have on someone professionally.

Tricia, a seasoned nine-year residence director, shared that she worked in a supportive, team environment. The residence director team spent time together inside and outside of work, often times eating lunch together or going out for dinner after work. At her university, when someone left their position, the remaining residence directors were responsible to take over chairing committees and additional emergency on-calls. For this recent departure she was sad due to the impact it had on the team and department. They had already been functioning understaffed. They had planned for five residence directors and they only had two. She was not pleased with the work redistribution and felt that the leadership and supervisory team could have taken on more responsibilities to assist the two remaining residence directors accomplish all of the tasks that needed to be covered. She felt that she did not get support from her supervisor.

Tricia, who had experienced several departures during her time at her university, felt that she had a different perspective than her other remaining colleagues. This perspective and experience helped her be more resilient. A while back, Tricia also experienced a sudden, unexpected departure of a colleague. She was critical regarding the residence life department's handling of the situation and their lack of communication. She indicated that the overall trust of the team and morale decreased due to the situation.

Dustin worked in a residence hall community prior to the departure of his colleague. After the departure, the department accelerated their restructuring of the department which resulted in him being moved to oversee an apartment community. With his four years of residence hall experience, he indicated that he felt shock and horror because he did not have knowledge of working with upperclassmen. He felt his supervisors support and encouragement helped. He was very clear regarding his boundaries with staff and did not form any personal relationships inside or outside of work as he felt it reduced drama, gossip, and cliques. He opted to have a social life outside of work to minimize conflicts and cliques within the department. Rob was surprised that his colleague left so quickly after a year and was not aware that he had been job searching. Also, due to the fact he was in the residence halls, we was not aware of the challenges that the apartments were facing. After the departure occurred and he took on the new responsibilities of overseeing the apartment communities, he felt that the changes were a "blessing in disguise". He was able to transition the toxic apartment work environment into a positive one.

Belkas, a seven-year residence director, experienced two staff departures within the past year. He was very close with one of them. Even though he only knew her for one year, they had established a strong relationship inside and outside of work. She visited him in the hospital after

his baby was born and she invited Belkas and his wife to her wedding. He was aware that she was unhappy in her role and that there were conflicts with other staff members. He felt that it brought down team morale and was not surprised when she left her position. He described himself as heartbroken over the departure due to the value he places on relationships. He invited the entire residence life department to his wedding. Belkas, however, was very surprised and disappointed that the other staff member gave his two-weeks' notice and left. He did not have a strong relationship with him and learned he had not been fulfilling his work responsibilities. Belkas' workload was not impacted as much as others on his team. He was very disappointed in the lack of supervision provided to his two colleagues that departed and hoped for the opportunity when he leaves to share his experiences. His wife, more than his supervisor, was a great support system for him.

Bruce started his employment at the same time with the colleague who departed. While Bruce has four years of experience as a residence director, they worked together for three years. They worked together on a big team of 30 residence directors and found it difficult to connect personally with everyone. They formed their relationship through training, working on committees, and having the same interests. They spent a considerable amount of time together outside of work socializing. Bruce was incredibly sad when his colleague departed. After his colleague left he got married and had a child. Bruce indicated that staying in contact with him helped him process the transition. His workload did not change very much but he did however help out and take on additional responsibilities due to the departure. Bruce was an advocate for strong staff relationships because he felt that staff would more likely stay around if they were encouraged to grow and develop. Due to the loss of his colleague, he became more reserved with social relationships outside of work.

Natalie, was the most self-reflective and introspective residence director interviewed. She on more than one occasion reflected, “what could I [we] have done differently.” Natalie had just under three years of experience working as a residence director and knew her colleague that departed for just under a year. She worked on a small team of about eight residence directors. The team morale was high prior to the departure. She believed that he left his position due to his lack of engagement within the staff team and the department. She worked in a freshman residence hall area and he worked in an upperclassman apartment community. They shared an a passion for diversity and inclusion within the workplace but did not spend time together outside of work. They also shared the experience of coming from a large Division I university with a prominent football team. Natalie was surprised that he left within one year and felt that the team dynamics may have played a role in the departure. She indirectly experienced a change in workload because her subordinate was relocated to take over the responsibility of overseeing the community where the departed worked. Natalie sought out transparency within the department as to why he left his position and what would be changed to prevent turnover occurring in the future and reflected on how she could be a part of the change.

### **Themes**

This study employed *a priori* coding or coding when “the categories are established prior to the analysis based on some theory” (Stemler, 2001, p. 4). For this study, Anderson et al.’s (2012) *4 S System for Coping* (Situation, Self, Support, Strategies) was used to structure the participant’s responses. The *4 S System for Coping* describes the four core variables that determine one’s ability to cope with a transition. The following are the themes based on the data analysis of the eight residence directors’ use of the *4 S System for Coping* after experiencing the departure of a colleague.

## **Situation**

All eight residence directors experienced a departure of one or more of their colleagues, and they all had their version of the *situation*. When a situation occurs, there are several factors that influence individuals' experiences in varying ways. Examples of these factors include the timing of the situation, their control over it, and any change in their role that they experienced (Anderson et al., 2012). The residence directors faced all of these factors as they coped with the transition.

## **Timing**

While timing of the departure was not specifically asked within the interview protocol, there was a general sense that without more opportunities for promotions and mid-level positions, such as becoming an assistant director, staff would always see their peers come and go to find the next step in their career elsewhere. Ashley, who knew the individual that left for approximately two years, mentioned that turnover and the typical length of time a residence director stays in their position can be a short period of time:

it was, it was hard at first because I thought I was losing someone really close to me, a friend . . . but I knew... that was sort of the lay of the land with these type of positions . . . give or take three, four years, a professional stay in their positions before they make a lateral or vertical move.

However, several residence directors commented on the timing of the departure and the short tenure that their colleagues had at their university. Most of them had been employed at their universities while their colleagues who departed were employed on average for only one year.



This timeline for departure had impacted their feelings toward the departure. One reason for this was the cyclical nature of residence life and higher education in which one can change and improve the work that is performed year after year. Rob noted:

I really value people who stay in their job for, you know, a semi-significant amount of time. So, you know, are you really getting a full, you know, purview of your job in a year? Probably not. Do I think my colleague who left in May was justified in leaving in a year with her position? Yes. Do I think my colleague who left in July was justified in leaving his position in a year? Maybe, maybe not, I don't know, but I don't think I, like, I just don't think you're doing justice to the job, the employer or really yourself to getting really quality experiences because if you're going through everything the first time you're like, Okay, well what can I do next time? Better? You never have that opportunity to do it better the next time.

Rob's longevity of four years at his current institution gave him the freedom to speak with experience about getting better year after year. Other residence directors also commented on the quick departure of their colleagues. Bruce shared:

It was more so that they were leaving . . . in that timeframe. I didn't make a whole bunch of friends while working and this is a position of transition as I like to call it, so people are in, people are out. And it felt like I knew at one point in time we were going to go separate ways, but I didn't know it was going to be that soon.

Bruce alluded to the overall transitional nature of the residence director position, but what stood out to him the most, and what was most impactful, was that his colleague left their position after such a short timeframe. Belkas commented about the extreme turnover of one specific position at

his university and his prediction that the trend of staying one year would continue due to the lack of change to the position:

Everyone always stays a year in that position for one reason or another. So they restructured it again for this upcoming hiring. So, we'll see how long this person's going to stay . . . whoever goes in that position, I'm expecting them only to stay maybe a year, less than a year now.

For the situation, timing had a big role on how the residence directors were impacted and how they felt about the departure. The less time a colleague stayed in their position, the larger the impact that they felt. The timing of the departures caused a disruption in relationships and what they saw as their current roles as staff.

### **Control**

The staff departed, for some this came as a surprise while others knew their colleague was going to leave. One's ability to control, or his or her lack of control over the situation of the staff member departing, was noted by several residence directors. While Natalie also shared concerns about the timing in which her colleague departed, because it was damaging to morale and she felt it occurred much more quickly than anticipated, she was sure to point out her control over the situation. She felt that she and her remaining peers did have some influence on the departure. She believed that the overall peer-to-peer climate was within their responsibility and could have resulted in a different outcome:

I think the fact that they left . . . in under a year . . . definitely kind of made an impact, but like what can we do as, as peers to keep folks around because I obviously can't control . . . you know, campus climate or things like that, but we can control the climate and the culture within people on the same level.

Belkas, on the other hand, did not take any personal ownership in the departure; rather, he was clear to blame the department in which he was employed. He believed that the housing department did not do what they could to retain the highly talented departing staff member, and it was this lack control over the situation that was hard for him to process:

I was very heartbroken. Very excited for her [the residence director that departed] because she sounded like she was able to get an opportunity that she wanted to have and what she wanted to do. Very disappointed in our department because we lost her because she had a lot of potential amount of things she could do but it sounded like from her that she wasn't given the opportunity to.

With every situation, control was named as a factor that influenced their response to the departure. This was their control over the situation or someone else's.

## **Role**

Each of the residence directors had a well-defined role prior to the departure of their colleague. Many of the residence directors experienced their role change due to the situation of their colleague departing. For many, it was a period of readjustment. They felt that morale was impacted by the amount of work that had to be done after the departure of their colleague as well as the stress and anxiety caused by taking on this additional workload. Ashely, Lauren, and Dustin were either relocated to a new residential community or had been assigned to take on an additional community. Ashley and Dustin left their student staff and residents and started fresh with a new set of student staff and residents. For Lauren, she doubled her workload and oversaw two communities. Lauren described the process of getting two communities:

I took on entire new building . . . and it's a little bit bigger of a building . . . my student load and my RA load doubled . . . but I wanted to get over there and start building the

team . . . and so I did everything for myself. Every single person in the department encouraged me to do...combine staff . . . and I was like, no, absolutely not. I refuse to have combined meetings and just shove them altogether because each building has their own needs. Each building has their own issues and sometimes we combined meetings . . . so this basically meant I was doing four hours of staff meetings on Monday nights instead of two.

Having two buildings was exhausting for Lauren, who said she should have asked for help or for someone else to oversee the hall council. She felt guilty for not attending every meeting and event and being spread too thin. She also shared that her budget was impacted by the additional duties. She typically purchased small gifts for her staff and hall council members and had to purchase even smaller items of appreciation due to the added individuals for whom she was responsible, causing her much stress and anxiety.

Dustin only had experience working with first year students in the residence halls and did not have the previous knowledge working with upperclassmen in an apartment setting. Initially, he was not happy with the change in his role after his colleague departed unexpectedly, noting how it greatly impacted him:

I don't think anybody had known that he [the colleague that departed] had interviewed. And so it was very much a surprise and obviously it had the biggest impact...on me because I ended up being moved from the residence hall area into the apartment area, which was something of a shock. I had never worked with upperclassmen before . . . it was a certain degree of shock and some degree of fear because I was going to be working with the student population I had first off, never worked with before and second of all had never had any interest in working with before.

This sudden and unexpected change was first met with some resistance. After successfully transforming the apartment community and staff to a positive and nontoxic atmosphere he later looked at the relocation and role change as a blessing in disguise. Dustin took on the new role and ended up learning a lot about himself and taking on the new challenge.

Ashley also transitioned to a new community and had a more positive experience with the initial transition of taking on the community that her departed colleague previously oversaw. Some of her nerves came from the fact that her colleague was loved and adored by the staff and students. She was surprised by the welcoming environment and the support she received from her new student and staff. Ashley shared:

The workflow changed in the sense that...we had to split up his work, including his community. . . I actually moved into his building, so uh, and I took on a new staff and new living community and . . . it was really, really interesting. . . . I didn't know I was ready, but . . . I took it head-on so the transition I thought was going to be really, really difficult, but it wasn't actually. I eased right on in. And people welcomed me with open arms, so I gave myself a lot, I was very, very hard on myself before.

However, Ashley did share that she struggled hearing the good news about her colleague departing, but also explained the difficulty in trying to be happy for someone who was leaving. This struggle came from balancing the happiness and at the same time realizing that she would have to take on more responsibilities. She indicated that the news “clouds your thoughts.” She stated:

I think when somebody leaves, and we were already short . . . it is like, Oh snap. So that means more duty. That means somebody has to move their home. That means we have to

connect with a whole different staff, adopt other process. It's sort of like you want to be happy, but on a back end of that, you know, what work lays ahead.

Ashley wanted to be supportive of her mentor who was leaving for a promotion but she was overwhelmed by emotions regarding the additional responsibilities that would occur with his departure.

Trisha, with her nine years of residence director experience, five at her current institution, felt sadness due to experiencing a lot of departures from her university, several that were mid-semester. She mentioned that she was concerned about the student-staff transition after losing their supervisor, as well as the additional work that she needed to take on after they left their position:

It was really sad both with the department, and...the RD team itself and along with the students' staff members . . . so that was really hard to transition from having that supervisor to no longer having a supervisor for the student staff members, and then for me to not having a coworker and then having to pick up all the stuff they had.

For *situation*, the departure of a colleague, there are factors such as the timing, their control over the departure, and any change in their role that the residence director experienced impacted how they coped with the transition. The timing and length of employment played a major role in how the residence directors were impacted and how they felt about the departure. The shorter the length a colleague stayed in their position, the larger the impact that they felt. With every situation, control was named as a factor that influenced their response to the departure. And lastly, the changes in their role impacted their ability to cope and move on due to the adjustments in their work and workload.

## **Self**

As the residence director processes through the transition of the departure of their colleague, *self* is how the individual experiences the event, issue, or change and “what the individual brings to the transition” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 72). Schlossberg (2011) described *self* as “the person’s inner strength for coping with the situation” (p. 160). The residence directors utilized techniques to self-soothe and process through the changes. Also, as the residence directors coped with the transition of the departure of their colleague, they were greatly affected by the relationship(s) they had with the individual(s) who departed. It was these relationships, inside and outside of work, that impacted the self-aspect of the residence directors coping with the transition.

Lauren, after having to take on an additional community, shared that more recently when staff departed, she not only felt sad but also a hint of jealousy. This jealousy was for the feeling that “they got out” or left the field of on-campus housing. Lauren also felt the need to cope; she had doubled her staff and residents initially without additional compensation and help from her team. She shared that she was concerned about how much of her own money she was spending on her student staff in an effort to support and develop them. She said she was exhausted from the experience. She was behind on laundry and cleaning and tried to spend her time with her dog who was feeling neglected because she was splitting her time between two communities. She had gained weight due to the changes that occurred after the departure of her colleague. Lauren disclosed:

And I feel like I’ve gained weight this year as, I mean, granted, I’m great at gaining weight anyways, but like, I came home I stopped being like, what is the healthy decision and started doing what is the comforting decision and just that was my way of kind of coping.

Lauren's unhealthy, yet comforting decisions were her way to cope with the transition.

Ashley felt that the transition of the departure was bittersweet because she had a special bond with the colleague that departed. Although she was understanding that her colleague was leaving to go on his own professional path, she felt that she was losing a friend who had supported her and helped her in her position. She commented, "if I wasn't so close to him it probably would've been a little bit easier." Ashley was surprised at the emotional stress that it caused. She disclosed:

I think that one thing I wish I would have known before is about the turnover. I guess I knew but I didn't know what or how that would impact me professionally . . . mentally, emotionally, and I think that's important to consider in these types of positions, especially those that are very team oriented....and especially positions where there's already a lot of emotional labor, right?

Natalie had the same feeling about the difficulty of losing a friend. For her she understood the impact on the entire team but also, due to the relationship, how it impacted her more. She shared:

I think that impacted me maybe a little bit more than my coworkers...because I just saw this kind of perpetual . . . lack of retention...that there was also is twofold. . . It hurts the team dynamic when you have that much turnover . . . but then it also kind of hits personally when you are close to them because you're also losing a friend, especially in res life. I mean you live where you work so you're constantly around them . . . which in a lot of ways is great . . . but then does present its challenges when all of a sudden that person's gone.



Natalie highlighted the team dynamic and social interactions that are disrupted by the departure of a colleague within a residence life team. This disruption can be impactful due to the amount of daily collaboration and social interaction that residence directors have.

While looking at self, several residence directors noted that relationships, social and working relationships, were important. All eight participants had varying levels of connectedness with the individual(s) who left. This was due to when they started in the position, their personal interests, and the desire to spend time together inside and outside of work. Their social connections varied from meeting for lunch at work, going line dancing, hanging out drinking together, or hosting potlucks. Some relationships were so strong that staff were invited to each other's weddings and to meet newborns at the hospital. Having deep social and working relationships helped the residence directors who were the closest to the individuals that departed. Belkas commented:

I know I firmly believe that you need to make sure you connect with somebody while you're still here and if you can't connect with them . . . you have to have at least one person you could identify as a best friend at work and so on. If you don't really have that, you might not really be happy in what you do on there. . . . It's why I don't want to leave here either is because of the relationships, but five years. Got to think about it now.

Residence directors were adamant about the power that relationships have in the work that they do in residence life. They noted how positive peer to peer interactions can be so meaningful in their desire to stay in their positions, as well as aid in building their self-confidence to do the work that they do. Bruce shared:

I think that if you have a strong relationship with those that you work with, you're more likely to stick around and find joy and take part in more and more things and learn, grow

and develop even further than what you maybe initially thought you could because you'll find the friends or the coworkers who will sit there and go, I see this capability in you. And I think you should give this a shot and then you'll say, if somebody has that faith in me, I can have that faith in me. Let me go and see what I can do. And if that does work out, then you keep growing further and further.

Due to strong relationships inside and outside of work, the residence directors often knew that the staff members were not happy in their positions and that they had begun to job search. They often learned about the departure well before the other staff members in the department. Having the knowledge of the search and acceptance of the new position helped when the departure actually occurred. Rob said this was the case for him; he was impacted more because he had a close relationship with the colleague and at the same time, he was less impacted by the staff member who departed with whom he did not have a close relationship:

For the colleague that departed in May, [it] was less of a surprise because I was more privy again probably through having those social relationships to, you know, the struggles that she was having with the position and, you know, with her supervisor. Both of them had really only been in their positions for around a year at the time that they had left, so did not stay an overly long amount of time, but more of a surprise that he was leaving and you know I just didn't have as much of a connection with him. So not as big of a, you know, shoot you're gone. . . . I definitely think that, yeah, you know, having that connection or you know, somebody you can talk to...or, you know, are comfortable hanging out with outside of the workspace was an important piece to our, our working relationship I guess too, yeah.

As the residence directors processed through the transition of the departure of their colleagues, they were greatly affected by the relationship(s) they had with the individual(s) who departed. It was these relationships, inside and outside of work, that impacted the *self* aspect of the residence directors coping with the transition both negatively and positively based on the situation.

## **Support**

*Support* is provided by those who are available to help the individual(s) through an event (Anderson et al. 2012). Schlossberg (2011) noted that “the support available at the time of the transition is critical to one’s sense of well-being” (p. 160). Several residence directors coped with the transition by using their support systems. This support was essential for the residence directors to cope with the transition. Residence directors who had high levels of communication with the individuals assisting them with the transition felt a greater sense of support. The most common source of support was from their supervisors. The second most noted source were others such as spouses, colleagues, and students. Lastly, some residence directors that mentioned they did not get the support they needed to properly transition after the departure.

**Supervisor Support.** More than half of the residence directors named their supervisors as the individual who helped or supported them through the transition. While each had his or her own reasons, the main explanations revolved around their positive communication and encouragement, the help preparing the residence directors for the change, and continued followed up that occurred. Dustin noted that his supervisor did this well:

Just first off, pep-talk, just, you wouldn’t believe how helpful that was. To hear that I have faith in you. This is going to be a good thing. We wouldn’t be doing this unless we thought you were going to be successful. I mean, sometimes I just need to hear that, but

just, I was very lucky to have prepared supervisors who have their documentation in a row who had a lot of the, the knowledge of the area to answer a lot of my questions because here are the apartment and the residence hall area, our standard operating procedures are actually very different. And so it was, it was really starting over.

Lauren shared that her supervisor helped her through the transition by giving her autonomy to make decisions about moving to the new community; but at the same time, he made suggestions on what direction she should take. She said this level of support throughout the year, as she took on another community, allowed her to be transparent about her own recent job search.

Bruce named his supervisor as the individual who helped him through the transition after his colleague departed because they had positive and ongoing communication. It was this level of openness and support that gave Bruce the freedom to share where he was on projects and the ability to ask for extra time or extensions for any work that was delayed. The residence directors who felt the most supported by their supervisor shared that they knew that they could reach out to their supervisors anytime they needed help. Ashley commented:

The supervisor that I had way back when, and the one I have now are very supportive and sort of, they want to make sure that I have what I need and I, I can feel how that gives me a little bit more confidence in the work that I'm doing as opposed to just going and hoping something sticks.

The residence directors found their supervisor to be a great source of support. They never felt alone as they processed through the changes that occurred after their colleague departed. Even though the residence directors had different situations, the supervisor was an active participant in the transition.

**Support of Others.** Support came from other sources as well, not just the residence directors' supervisors. Some of the residence directors felt support from their staff and students whom they supervised. Several mentioned that their staff made a big difference by offering to take on additional responsibilities. Ashley had noted the warm welcome and early on acceptance that she received from the staff and students in her new community. She, as well as Belkas, mentioned their spouses as a source of support. These two residence directors were the only ones who divulged that they were married. Belkas shared his thoughts and feelings about the departure with his wife, disclosing that she gave him useful advice regarding not spreading his thoughts and feelings too widely:

Because I vented to her about everything, she of course goes, "Is this, is this really worth venting or who are you talking like this too because be careful who you mention this to, because student affairs, is very, very small? So, if you start making waves you're basically burning a bridge somewhere about complaining about it and you're not going to be able to move up anywhere."

Due to this reminder, he was cautious on who he shared his thoughts and feelings with and kept most of his thoughts and feelings to her. He was appreciative of her support and her encouragement to keep it to himself.

Ashley also felt a great deal of support from her spouse. She was especially thankful because he had to also cope with the transition due to Ashley moving and relocating to another residential community. She relocated to the residence hall that was formerly overseen by her mentor, the colleague that departed. Ashley was appreciative of her husband's encouragement to

be excited to move and that they would have a fresh start together in a new residence hall. She shared:

So I think . . . it was hard at first, but then I got with the program so to speak...I was like, okay, this is how things go and . . . having an opportunity to, I don't know, build something else with my husband helped as well because if my husband wasn't there, I think that would have changed things a little bit.

Ashley felt that without the support and encouragement of her husband, she may have had a more difficult time taking on the new experience and moving to a new community.

**No Support.** While most residence directors gave positive feedback regarding the support they received from their supervisor and other individuals, other residence directors expressed disappointment and frustration. These feelings reinforce the need and positive impact that support has on the success of the residence director after the experience the departure of their colleague.

For example, Tricia had experience several departures however, she expressed disappointment in the lack of communication and support that she received from her supervisor. She wished that he would have been more helpful and reassuring. She also wished that he had talked about it with her:

I mean they kind of talked about it, like . . . but overall it wasn't like, hey, here's what's going to happen, here's how we're gonna work through it, here's some . . . support that you can use or whatever to get over this because this has been happening frequently . . . so I would say no, that they didn't really help. . . I mean he's taking on-calls and stuff like that, but he hasn't had a conversation about, hey, how are you doing now that this person is gone. You know, anything like that.

Tricia felt that the conversation should have taken place, at a minimum the follow-up with her to ask her how she was doing after her colleague had departed.

Ashely and Natalie would have also preferred increased communication and support from their residence life departments. Natalie felt that she had a role in the departure and that as a staff team they could change what they were doing to reduce staff turnover in the future. She felt the department could have been more clear and transparent with their communication regarding their role in the departure and how things could change. She shared:

Transparency in terms of okay, what can we do...to kind of change either the team dynamic, the level of morale...you know, I think talking about being willing to talk about some of those things and I think we always have to in any organization...it's necessary to kind of have some onus on like, okay, this is an area that we're not super great at but here's how we can do better. And so I think, uh, the level of transparency, I would say increasing that a bit...would've been something that they could've done better.

Ashley experienced a sudden and unexpected departure of a colleague. The residence director team did not get any information from her department's leadership team regarding why the departure occurred. She felt that the lack of communication from the department was alarming and unnerving. She indicated that this made the staff uneasy and it impacted their overall satisfaction. Ashley disclosed:

The RD was let go and it was the middle of, it was actually I think at the end of the fall semester. And so it was not, it was, no one even knew why this happened. And we still to this day don't know, I had been...even the person doesn't really know why it happened and this person was one of the top of the line RDs...so you, you're like, why did this person go if anybody was going to go, it should have been one of us, you know...and

kind of thing...but I think one of the things that happened is that the way that it happened, the department didn't talk about that all...and, and it was one of those things that it shocked the entire department...and so I think that that was like one of the hardest ones because no one expected that.

The residence directors reported receiving support from several areas, supervisors, spouses, other colleagues. Support was essential for the residence directors to cope with the transition. Residence directors who experienced high levels of communication between the individuals who were assisting them with the transition felt a greater sense of support. Overall this support allowed for them to be successful in transitioning after the departure of their colleague.

### **Strategies**

*Strategies* are the coping mechanisms available for the individual to use to process the event or issue (Anderson et al. 2012). Schlossberg (2011) noted, “the person who flexibly uses lots of strategies will be better able to cope” (p. 161). There did not appear to be one magical method of coping; rather, all residence directors employed several different techniques.

However, the commonality was that they each used a strategy to cope with the transition. The residence directors used a variety of strategies to cope with the transition after the departure of their colleague, ranging from binge watching TV, staying in contact with their colleague that departed, or being guarded when the new staff were hired. These varied responses provided the residence directors the opportunity to reduce stress and the effects of the departure. It also assisted with how they moved forward in the future as they prepared themselves for any future departures.



After the departure of her colleague and taking on an additional residential community, Lauren spent much of her time going back and forth between the two residence halls. She was constantly balancing her time between the two areas. When asked how she coped with the changes after her colleague departed she disclosed the following strategies:

Literally the way that I coped is Netflix and trying to find the next sort of like bubble gummy show to binge watch so that my brain can shut down . . . and then food definitely, coffee. I've...had so much coffee this semester or this year. It's been ridiculous. I think drinking out with other colleagues and stuff.

Lauren was able to find a variety of strategies that helped her cope with the situation. Natalie found herself to be much more introspective. She spent a lot of her time wondering what she could have done differently. She was focused on the role that she played in the staff member's satisfaction with their position and how she could have taken steps to get to know the colleague who departed more and how they could have made it a better team overall. She noted that she served on the training and staff development committee, and it was their responsibility to promote connection and engagement between the staff members. She felt that the departure was in direct relation to the work that the committee was responsible for completing and that they could have done a better job. Natalie shared that the committee needs to look at how they establish teams through positive relationships, noting, "And so again, what can we do kind of as...in our trainings and our staff development to really make sure that we're promoting some of those things in that feeling of engagement...to add to retention."

Other residence directors did have the relationship and connection. For them, their strategy was to remain close with the colleague who departed, even after they left their position.

The relationship had to be strong enough to endure the changes that occurred. Tricia felt that she was able to cope with the transition due to this continued relationship:

I think it was okay because a lot of us had a close relationship so we still remained in contact...so overall, I ended up handling it really well because we still have remained in contact because we're Facebook friends, we still talk outside, sometimes we'll get together. So for me it wasn't as bad, but for others they may not have had that close relationship with them.

A couple of residence directors felt that maintaining contact and continuing the relationship with their colleague helped them with the transition after their colleague departed. However, Dustin used his own strategy of not forming the relationship in the first place. His strategy of completely socially distancing himself made him the "outlier" of the sample group. An outlier is "an individual or other entity whose score differs markedly from the scores obtained by other members of the sample" (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 631). Separating his work and personal life was his strategy to cope with the transition to protect himself:

I guess I like to separate work and...in my life, I know it's very traditional with residence directors, oh we, you know, we live together, we work together there for we're always together and I don't believe in that. I don't believe that's healthy. I think that's actually very destructive because when you know such major aspects of your work life start mingling with such major aspects of your personal life. To me that's where gossip starts. That's where drama, that's where cliques form and I don't find that very comfortable. So I have a very developed and had been making sure to develop a very healthy social life outside of work...because I just sort of don't want to take that with me into my personal life when I want a social time to relax to. I just want to leave work at work and I want to

leave my life within my life and keep those two separate for my own well-being. And I find that also helps, again, minimize drama, minimize conflicts, minimize clicking and uh, I don't find that it has a negative impact on my ability to successfully collaborate with my colleagues.

Dustin's clear boundaries of not having any kind of social relationship with his peers was his way of protecting himself. Several residence directors did not initially feel this same way about socially distancing from their peers. However, during the interview process, they realized that they did in fact use a similar strategy to transition after their colleague departed. They felt the need to be guarded when it came to establishing relationships with the new staff who replaced the ones that had departed. Being guarded meant that they were less likely to form close personal relationships with the new staff in order to protect themselves from the sadness they experienced when their colleague, who they had a close personal relationship with, departed their position. Natalie commented:

I think that...you know, by, by being able to see like all of these people come very, very quickly and then leave very quickly. It makes you less...enticed to want to say like, yeah, let's get to know you and let's get to know you outside of work...because you're just going to leave or I'm going to leave or something...so yeah, I would definitely say that...that's a fair assessment...and to be more guarded...or that I was more guarded.

This guarded behavior is an example of a strategy to show how the staff shielded themselves from being hurt again. Tricia, who had been a residence director at her current institution for five years, said that she felt the same way about being hesitant to build new relationships:

I feel like I don't want to get you as close with them as I did others because I feel like I'm going to be losing them...for instance...I may be losing another coworker...when they started job searching and so I may be losing another coworker. So it makes it hard for me to want to get close to them if I'm going to end up losing them if that makes sense.

Tricia shared that as the departures continued, she became desensitized and unemotional because she had experienced so many departures before.

When looking at strategies for coping with the transition after the departure, Rob reflected on what he learned from working at a previous residence life department at another university. He had experienced what he called “super-high turnover.” From this experience, he decided he would not work at an institution or for organization specifically for the people. He was adamant that it was too hard to know how long they would be their position or stay in their roles.

Some of the residence directors had other suggestions for strategies based on their experiences. Ashley wanted to make sure that the new staff were prepared and not surprised like she was regarding the turnover in the residence director team. She shared:

Okay, this is how things go and this is how you can handle it. And I think that's what I try to do for an RLC who I left or I was close with before I left . . . I lent every piece of knowledge that I could to her so that she can prepare and not necessarily have to go through things to learn the hard way and I let her know...you know, you just have to always think about like, think ahead of this because I was very much in the moment.

For Ashley, it helped her to provide this advice to the other staff as a way to cope. However, Ashley was not the only one thinking about the future and how to do things differently. Part of Rob's strategy was to examine the job description, staff resources, and the way the work

could have been distributed as his way to cope. He mentioned that he wished the department made a decision earlier on regarding whether to fill the vacant position. Three other residence directors discussed their desire to hire and train the staff more quickly. Bruce shared:

I'm a big fan of hiring before you know you need to replace somebody and then letting that person effectively teach and train for about a month or so or two weeks to where there's overlap. But there are definitely. I know that that is not always feasible, but in a perfect world that's what I would have preferred . . . [to] have somebody there sooner rather than later to where maybe they had gotten the overlap training. and then it's hey cool, you're good to just start up right away and you're already connected. You know, how to take care of things and it's not, we went two and a half months without somebody in this position.

As noted from these examples, the residence directors used a variety of strategies to cope with the transition after the departure of their colleague. These varied responses provided them the opportunity to reduce the stress and the effects of the departure. These insights also assisted in terms of how they moved forward in the future as they prepared themselves for any future departures.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study of eight residence directors was to understand their perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues. Research on residence directors, as well as on turnover in higher education in general, is limited (Janosik et al., 2003). The literature on residence directors has shortcomings in that it focuses mostly on recruitment and retention and fails to look at what happens to the staff left behind after a colleague moves on (Belch & Mueller, 2003; Belch, Wilson, & Dunkel, 2009; Davidson, 2012).

Understanding the effect of employee turnover on the remaining residence life staff is important because those staff members play key roles in student persistence and success.

Anderson et al.'s (2012) adult transition theory was the guiding theoretical framework used for this study. Anderson et al. defined transition as "any event [anticipated or unanticipated] or nonevent [anticipated event that does not occur] that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). Adults in transition often know the issues troubling them but need assistance working through their issues to explore, understand, and cope with the new situation, role, or routine.

The Anderson et al.'s (2012) adult transition theory's *4 S System for Coping* theoretical framework was used as a guide to better understand the experiences of the remaining residence directors coping with the departure of a colleague. In reviewing the usage of the *4 S System of Coping*, situation, self, support, and strategies, the following is a summary of the themes. For *situation*, the timing of the departure, especially for those that lost someone one year or less, the control or lack of control of departure, and the change in role or additional duties the staff took on after the departure were all critical factors in how the staff coped. For *self*, relationships, both work and social had an impact on how the residence directors experienced and felt about the departure. Relationships had both a positive and negative impact on the staff. For *support*, supervisors were named as key individuals who helped the staff cope with the transition, as well as others such as spouses and colleagues. Clear and consistent communication from their supervisors and the department in which they were employed was also important. Lastly for *strategies*, residence directors employed several methods to respond and move forward after the departure. Several residence directors found that maintaining the relationship was helpful while others found themselves holding back and being more guarded when developing relationships

with the new staff when they arrived. The *4 S System of Coping* revealed how the residence directors coped with the transition caused by the departure of their colleague.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH

#### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study of eight residence directors was to understand their perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues. Research on residence directors, as well as on turnover in higher education in general, is limited (Janosik et al., 2003). The literature on residence directors has shortcomings in that it focuses mostly on recruitment and retention and fails to look at what happens to the staff left behind after a colleague moves on (Belch & Mueller, 2003; Belch, Wilson, & Dunkel, 2009; Davidson, 2012). Understanding the effect of employee turnover on the remaining residence life staff is important because those staff members play key roles in student persistence and success.

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#### **Summary of the Findings**

Anderson et al.'s (2012) adult transition theory's *4 S System for Coping* theoretical framework was used as a guide to better understand the experiences of the remaining residence directors coping with the departure of a colleague. In reviewing the usage of the *4 S System of Coping*, situation, self, support, and strategies, the following is a summary of the themes. For



*situation*, the timing of the departure, especially for those that lost someone one year or less, the control or lack of control of departure, and the change in role or additional duties the staff took on after the departure were all critical factors in how the staff coped. For *self*, relationships, both work and social had an impact on how the residence directors experienced and felt about the departure. Relationships had both a positive and negative impact on the staff. For *support*, supervisors were named as key individuals who helped the staff cope with the transition, as well as others such as spouses and colleagues. Clear and consistent communication from their supervisors and the department in which they were employed was also important. Lastly for *strategies*, residence directors employed several methods to respond and move forward after the departure. Several residence directors found that maintaining the relationship was helpful while others found themselves holding back and being more guarded when developing relationships with the new staff when they arrived. The *4 S System of Coping* revealed how the residence directors coped with the transition caused by the departure of their colleague.

### **Discussion of Themes**

Anderson et al.'s (2012) adult transition theory's *4 S System for Coping* theoretical framework was used as a guide to better understand the experiences of the remaining residence directors coping with the departure of a colleague. The *4 S System of Coping*: situation, self, support, and strategies, were identified as the four major themes of this study. However, other themes emerged. These additional themes will be shared within this section and expanded upon in the Conclusions section.

The first additional theme is communication. The importance and impact of successful communication was weaved throughout the findings. Communication regarding department

plans for a departure are significant to create staff buy-in and acceptance to the change. It is crucial to speak with all staff that remain at the university to understand their thoughts and feelings tied to the departure. Communication is needed for input and feedback when roles are changed or workloads are altered to complete tasks. Communication is also needed for changes to departmental policies and procedures related to the departure. The lack of communication from the department regarding the departure can create an environment of mistrust and anxiety.

The second additional theme is relationships. Individual relationships with colleagues, both working and social, impact how a residence director cope with the transition. Relationships vary between individuals based on interests, reporting structure, start date, roles, and other variables. However, in each situation relationships that residence directors have with their peers impact their satisfaction and moral. Due to their relationships, some staff may be more reserved after their colleague departs. This can be a challenge due to the role that collaboration and teamwork play within job responsibilities of residence directors. Relationships are not only important while employees are present, but after they leave. For some, it can benefit them to have the relationship continue after their colleague departs.

The third theme is supervisory support. Supervisors need to be supportive and encouraging to foster open communication and a strong relationship. They should be a source of guidance but also be willing to take on additional responsibilities where necessary. Supervisory support needs to be adapted for each staff member based on their needs. The support should be consistent and frequent. Staff may feel a greater sense of comfort and belonging when they know their supervisor is available and willing to help them. Again, communication, relationships, and supervisory support are in addition to the identified themes (situation, self, support, strategies)

associated with the theoretical framework. These additional themes will be explored in greater detail in the Conclusions section.

## **Conclusions**

Residence directors are very likely to experience the departure of one or more colleagues during their time of employment. The average length of employment for an entry-level residence director is three to five years (Jackson, Miller, Hyatt, & Yao, 2013; Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009), although some leave within the first year of employment (Belch & Mueller, 2003). It is through this study's findings on residence directors' perceptions of the departure of a colleague that the following conclusions and recommendations for practice are drawn.

Residence directors were surprised, shocked, and saddened by the lack of longevity their coworkers had in their positions. This was especially true for those residence directors who stayed for only one year or less. It was impactful for the staff and department to experience the departure, especially when they were so quick (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010). While residence life departments cannot stop a staff member who plans to leave, it would be helpful to prepare all staff for a potential departure. It is recommended to acknowledge that turnover in the residence director team may, and most likely will, occur. This can be done by creating a culture of openness and making sure that everyone is on the same page and understands what could and would happen if a staff member departs.

When a departure occurred, staff felt that they either had control or lacked the control of the situation. To provide more control over the situation of someone leaving, it is essential for residence life departments to provide opportunities for the residence directors to establish their own team and culture. Taking steps to create opportunities for staff to get to know one another

inside and outside of work is also necessary. It is important to develop a culture of care, support, and open communication between all levels of staff, because without it low morale and lack of trust develop. Belch, Wilson, and Dunkel (2015) found that “staff are meaningfully engaged in the department and welcomed into a supportive environment where they are cared for both personally and professionally” (p. 6). As supported by Dickerson’s (2001) research, those who felt as though they lacked control within their role in residence life departments are encouraged to provide a variety of ways to receive feedback for improvements regarding all aspects of the position. Corey and Corey (2006) shared that high functioning groups are productive when “feedback is given freely and accepted without defensiveness” (p. 234). This allows the staff to have a voice, or control, in the work their work. Exit interviews are a beneficial tool used to gather valuable information for those that depart to improve working conditions and retention (Harris, 2000). Based on the results of this study, it is recommended to conduct exit interviews and get feedback from all staff during the departure, not just the employee who departed. Not only is it recommended to conduct the exit interview, it is recommended to utilize Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg’s *4 S system of Coping* as a guide to developing questions for the remaining residence directors. Using these data, supervisors can assess where the staff are in terms of coping with the changes and help them transition based on their unique situations.

When a departure occurs, the work of the residence director still needs to be completed. This can be a challenge for the staff who remain behind. Job responsibilities are shifted and often reassigned to other residence directors. This was done in a variety of ways due to the many factors associated with a departure such as time of year, how much notice was given, the team dynamics, and the duties that needed to be completed. Jo (2008) found that after staff departures, “the most mentioned complaint was having to carry the extra work load while filling in for a

vacant position which caused great stress on those left behind” (p. 574). Hetty van Emmerick, Bakker, and Euwema (2009) shared:

When job demands [workload and emotional demands] are continuously greater than supporting power of employees, the resulting energy depletion may undermine efforts to actively participate in change initiatives, and it becomes more likely that the employee will develop negative attitudes toward organizational change initiatives. (p. 598)

Residence life departments need to be aware of this potential for negative attitudes and create a basic protocol regarding the departure of a residence director. It is recommended that, at a minimum, the departure is discussed with all remaining staff members to gather feedback and input on how the workload should be distributed and how each staff member may be impacted by the departure, especially those who had a close relationship with the individual. The goal would be to create a culture of teamwork, support, and growth. Providing the opportunity for on-going communication and giving the remaining staff a voice or say in how things change will assist in creating buy-in and greater acceptance to the change (Lucas & Kline, 2008; Lumadi & Mampuru, 2010). Staff may also need help from their supervisors to see the benefits of taking on additional challenges and opportunities as a chance for personal and professional growth and development that may advance their careers. Belch et al. (2015) described this as a much desired “culture of opportunity” and a factor needed for residence director retention (p. 7) and Johnsrud, Heck, and Rosser (2000) noted this opportunity as an important work-life issue for morale and retention.

The findings from the current study suggest that relationships do matter. This aligns with Rosser and Javinar’s (2016) findings that “student affairs professionals value-more than the other work life issues-the importance of fostering positive relationships with those they interact with;

more specifically, they enjoy building positive relationships with colleagues within and between work units” (p. 11). Staff must work cooperatively and consider others, and not just work independently, in order to accomplish their tasks (Janosik et al., 2003). Having strong relationships help while the colleague is still part of the team and for maintaining relationships after the departure. Teams are successful when “most members feel a sense of inclusion, and excluded members are invited to be more active” (Corey & Corey, 2006, p. 234). It is recommended to establish strong residence director teams and assist them with building social relationships inside and outside of work.

When staff have relationships inside and outside of work, they often know about the departure ahead of time. This minimizes shock and provides the staff time to process. However, this knowledge and time does not take away from the sense of loss and sadness that the remaining staff members may feel after the colleague departs. Kortegast and Hamrick (2009) found that “changes in relationships with departing colleagues may affect the quality and quantity of social supports available to transitioning individuals” (p. 189). Supervisors need to be aware of the relationships that staff have inside and outside of work so that they can manage the effect the departure has on the remaining staff’s feelings and overall morale. Jo (2008) found “high turnover can also shape the attitudes and behavior of those who remain, especially if the departing employee had a close relationship with the one left behind; in such a case, employee moral erodes” (p. 573). Supervisors need to be attentive to individual needs after the departure occurs based on their relationship with the person who departed. The closer the relationship was, the stronger the feelings tended to be.

For residence directors who lacked having a relationship with the individual who departed, they did not report being impacted by the departure itself; rather, their concern tended

to focus on how it impacted them in the realm of additional work or changed roles. For staff who do not have a strong relationship, it is recommended to determine if they were successfully managing the teamwork and collaboration piece of their positions and how it impacts the overall team. Groups that do not work together find that there is an “indifference or lack of awareness of what is going on in the group” (Corey & Corey, 2006, p. 235). It would be important to investigate if the lack of relationship had a role in the actual departure, as “a lack of social support can lead to attrition” (Tull, 2009, p. 142). Also, Shaukat, Yousaf, and Sanders (2017) found “relationships at work are a valuable resource at workplace and relationship conflict is the loss of such resources” (p. 17). Again, supervisors need to be attentive to the individual needs of each staff member on the residence director team and see how the relationship impacts the entire team’s group dynamics.

Experiencing turnover, especially a lot, not only impacted the team dynamics based on the loss of the colleague but also once the position was filled. The remaining residence directors were more likely to be reserved and less likely to be engaged and form close relationships with the new staff member. This is a strategy used to cope with the loss of the departing staff member and a way for the residence directors to protect themselves from being hurt again. To combat this, it is recommended that residence life departments and supervisors meet with the returning staff members to remind them of the importance of relationships, inside and outside of work, as well as the importance of teamwork and collaboration (Belch et al., 2015; Janosik et al., 2003; Rosser & Javinar, 2016). Residence life departments and supervisors should also provide ample resources and opportunities for residence directors to form these relationships.

Relationship building allowed for peer and supervisory support of residence directors as they successfully processed through the transition. Relationships with colleagues, as well as with

their supervisors, have been found to have a significant positive effect on residence directors (Davidson, 2012; Henning, Cilente, Kennedy, & Sloane, 2011; Rosser & Javiner, 2003). It was these relationships that helped the residence director staff cope with the transition and move forward in their positions. Henning et al. (2011) stated that “residence life professionals seek support from supervisors, mentors, and colleagues to fulfill their job responsibilities” (p. 34). Congruent with Hetty van Emmerik et al.’s (2009) research, supervisors’ support played a significant role in how the residence director coped with the transition. According to Tull (2009), “Supervision has been described as a method of establishing ongoing relationships to meet the goals of their unit, divisions, or institution (p. 129). Supervisors need to be attuned to the individual needs of each of their staff members based on the residence directors’ relationship with the individual who departed. The supervisor’s communication should acknowledge any changes that occurred and provide frequent encouragement to the staff. The supervisor should follow up and check in with the remaining staff, assessing what is needed but understanding that more communication is better than less. Supervisors’ support influences staff members’ job satisfaction, morale, and development, and in turn their desire to stay or leave their position (Davis & Cooper, 2017; Jo, 2008; Johnsrud et al., 2000; Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016). Supervisors should be trained on communication skills as represented by Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg’s (2012) adult transition theory and their *4 System of Coping*, as well as synergistic supervisory skills (Saunders, Cooper, Winston, & Chernow, 2000; Tull, 2006). Also, where possible, the supervisor should look at opportunities to support the staff member by taking on additional responsibilities left by the residence director who departed and not solely leaving them to the remaining residence director team or one specific individual.



Supervisors can also assist with connecting the remaining staff to other sources of support. They should be encouraged to seek out additional individuals such as their spouses, friends, and colleagues. It is important for supervisors to not stretch the remaining staff too thin and seek help from sources such as various other student affairs offices. Student affairs professionals often start their careers in residence life, so it would be natural to tap into this resource especially when there would be limited training needed based on their previous residence life experience.

Residence directors felt over-loaded and in limbo after their colleague departed due to taking on additional responsibilities and the timeline to hire and training a new staff member. Residence life departments should look to avoid these situations. While human resources regulations differ at many institutions, residence life departments need to effectively and efficiently hire and train the new residence director(s). Communication remains a key during the hiring process. Barr and Desler (2000) wrote, “Communication must be consistent, frequent, and of high quality and originate in all parts of the organization, not just from the top” (p. 193). This is especially true for the individual(s) whose role(s) changed due to the departure.

Staff benefitted from remaining close with their colleagues after they departed. This was a major benefit to the positive relationships that were formed inside and outside of work among the staff team. It would be beneficial to encourage the ongoing process of maintaining relationships with colleagues prior to a staff departure. Depending on the nature of the departure (voluntary verses involuntary), it is recommended to offer the departing staff member a way to stay involved within the department. It would be beneficial to the remaining staff to create a culture of giving back to the department by inviting the staff to assist with residence director or resident assistant training and presentations or attend social events within the department.

In summary, it was through this study's findings on residence directors' perceptions of the departure of a colleague that the above conclusions and recommendations for practice were drawn. The findings showed that when factors such as communication, relationships, and support are all very important and should be considered when a residence director experiences the departure of a colleague. Communication is needed at all stages of the process during the transition. Staff need the opportunity to give feedback regarding policies, procedures, and the division of duties and workload adjustments. Ongoing and frequent communication from the supervisors, including during the hiring process, is helpful. Relationships, inside and outside of work, are important to residence director morale and job satisfaction and how staff are impacted by the departure. Supervisors need to be mindful of the positive and negative consequences of relationships play into how the staff member transitions. Lastly, staff need support. The most beneficial support is from their supervisors, but it is also needed from others such as spouses, colleagues, and staff. When residence life departments focus on communication, relationships, and support, they may be able to reduce costs, improve job satisfaction, reduce turnover, and increase productivity.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study looked at the eight residence directors' perceptions of the departure of a colleague. There are several implications for practice that would benefit residence life departments. The first implication for practice is training all levels of the staff team. Training should start with Adult Transition theory and the 4 S System for Coping. That way they have a foundation for dealing with transition and/or helping someone who is experiencing a transition. Training is also needed regarding the themes: communication, relationships, and supervisory

support. These areas are skill-based and often do not come naturally for individuals. Also, resources are needed for the implementation of effective training.

A second implication for practice is establishing policies and procedures for staff departures. For example, many departments have on-boarding checklists. Departments should establish protocols for off-boarding to include steps to take with staff left behind. These steps could include meetings to discuss workload and job duty reassignments. Another policy that could be implemented is the exit interview for all staff. The purpose would be to gain insight on the experiences of the staff member who is left behind to better prepare for the work that lays ahead.

The last implication for practice is assessment. We know that the ongoing, consistent feedback is important. However, assessment practices are important and useful tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the work being done. Assessment allows for the continued evaluation of what is working and what needs to be improved. It as allows for residence life departments to best match resources with needs, such as training.

### **Implications for Research**

While this study provided insight to the residence directors' lived experiences, there are several topics that may be worthy of further study or a closer look. The first topic is a study specifically looking at resident assistants. Resident assistants are student staff members who are training and supervised by residence directors. Several residence directors in this study not only shared their perceptions of the departure of their colleague but also noted their perceptions of the impact on student staff members. This included losing their supervisor, welcoming the new residence director, and offering to assist the residence directors complete their additional tasks.

This student perspective regarding losing their supervisor would be interesting given the role that resident assistants play in student success in on-campus housing and higher education.

A second topic is a study looking at assistant directors' perceptions of the departure of one of their residence directors or subordinates. Several key areas of the study to investigate would be how losing a staff member impacted their work as their supervisor and the impact on their entire staff's relationships and team dynamics. It would be important to look at their perceptions and thoughts regarding residence director job responsibilities and reassigning the workload after a staff member departed. It would be interesting to see if communication, relationships, and support were also areas of importance after they experienced the departure of a subordinate.

A third topic is a study looking at other variables such as the type and timing of the departure. For the type of departure, determining if the residence directors' perceptions change or become altered based on why they left their position and the type of departure, voluntary or involuntary. Also, taking a closer look at the timing of the departure. As noted, residence life and higher education are cyclical in nature and there are peak times of year when it is more challenging to lose a colleague. Unfortunately, the literature did not support looking at only a mid-semester departure. However, there is still the speculation that a mid-semester departure would be more complicated than the end of the semester or year which tend to make job responsibilities and tasks more challenging.

A fourth topic is a study that more closely examines peer-to-peer relationships, specifically those individuals who choose not to form personal and social relationships inside and outside of work. It would be stimulating to examine whether it is possible to completely

separate and think, as Dustin did in the current study, that the lack of connectedness does not impact one's ability to collaborate and accomplish their job responsibilities.

The last topic is a study that would be conducted nationally within the ACUHO-I region and/or within other areas of student affairs. A national, broad-based study, would increase the sample size and the amount of data with which to work. This would expand the scope of the study to provide greater insight on the lived experiences of residence directors left behind. As far as student affairs, many departments within the division experience turnover in their teams. It would be intriguing to see if the findings would be similar in regard to communication, relationships, and support within other areas of student affairs.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on understanding residence directors' perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues. This understanding will allow for best practices for residence life departments facing a staff departure, as well as minimizing other institutional costs associated with the turnover. This qualitative study looked at residence directors at four-year institutions who had experienced a departure of a coworker within the same academic year. Although researchers have examined residence directors' recruitment and retention, this study is unique in that it examined the perceptions of the staff members who remained following the departure of a colleague.

Residence directors play a significant role in the success of an on-campus housing program or department, and when those directors leave, the turnover costs, both direct and indirect, are significant (Allen et al., 2010). Rosser and Javinar (2003) found those costs to include "efficiency, consistency, and quality in the delivery of services, as well as the investment made in the knowledge base of the institution or unit" (p. 825). Regardless of the reasons for

turnover, it disrupts staff teamwork, cohesion, and morale, which makes it harder if not impossible to successfully achieve university goals (Allen et al., 2010). The lack of staff cohesion can cause animosity within the staff group, which leads to fragmentation of the group (Corey & Corey, 2006). While costs and impact of turnover remain high, there is no research exploring residence directors' perceptions and reactions to a departure of one of their colleagues.

This study showed that residence directors, in one shape or another, were impacted by the departure of their colleague, specifically in areas of communication, relationships, and supervisory support. This study may benefit directors and department heads of residence life programs, assistant directors, and residence directors by shedding light on residence directors' perceptions of the departure of a colleague. It also provides conclusions and recommendations for practice and further research. These data, for example, can be used to establish protocol for training both the residence directors and assistant directors. This training could involve effective communication skills, staff development and relationship building, supervision, and managing workload and job duties after a departure.

This study contributes to the literature on residence directors by helping understand the residence directors' perceptions of a departure of a colleague. The results of this study were analyzed through the lens of Anderson et al.'s (2012) adult transition theory and the *4 S System of Coping*, with sub-categories for situation, self, support, and strategies. This framework suggests that when a departure occurs, if residence life departments focus on communication, relationships, and support, they may be able to reduce costs, improve job satisfaction, reduce turnover, and increase productivity.

## **Appendix A**

### Literature Review Search Terms

## **Appendix A**

### Literature Review Search Terms

Residence directors: turnover, recruitment, retention, job satisfaction

Hall Directors

Residence life

Employee withdrawal

Premature departure

Employee disposition

Management/HR- departure/attrition/turnover

Staff turnover

Organizational change

Adult transition theory

Job satisfaction

Morale

Exit interviews

Student Affairs: turnover, job satisfaction, attrition, support

Supervision: Synergistic



## **Appendix B**

### Research Protocol

## **Appendix B**

### **Research Protocol**

RQ: What are Residence Directors' perceptions of a departure of a colleague?

1. Describe the residence director team dynamics prior to the departure of your colleague.
  - Probe: Describe the overall morale.
  - Probe: Describe the overall teamwork/collaboration.
  - Probe: Were there any conflict/challenges?
2. Describe your personal working relationship with the colleague who departed.
  - Probe: Describe your teamwork.
  - Probe: Describe any conflicts/challenges you may have had.
  - Probe: Describe your collaboration on committees/projects.
  - Probe: Describe any shared interests that you may have had.
3. Describe your social relationship with the colleague who departed.
  - Probe: Describe your activities shared outside of work.
  - Probe: Describe the amount of time spent together.
  - Probe: Describe any shared interests you may have had.
  - Probe: Describe any conflict/challenges you may have had.
4. How did you feel when your colleague departed the position?
  - Why did you feel that way?
  - Based on what the other staff said and did, do you believe the other staff felt the same?
5. Did your workload change after their departure? Explain.
  - Did you get additional work or staff responsibilities?
  - How was the workload divided?
  - Did you agree with the workload division? Please explain.
  - Would you have done things differently? What would you have done and why?
6. How did you cope with the changes after your colleague departed their position?
  - In what ways did you adjust to the changes?
7. Did anyone assist you with the transition after your colleague departed?
  - Who were they?
  - What did they do?
  - Was it helpful?
  - What could they have done to be more helpful?
8. How was the team personally affected by your colleague's departure?
  - Probe: Did it affect morale?
  - Probe: Did it affect teamwork?
  - Probe: Did it cause any conflicts/challenges?
9. Do you feel your experience is any different from your peers? In what ways?
  - Why do you feel that way?
10. If you had a magic wand, what would you change after your colleague departed?
  - Probe: How would you change the teamwork?

- Probe: How would you change the workload?
11. Is there anything that you would like to share regarding the departure of your colleague that we have not already discussed?

## **Appendix C**

### **Participant Identification Email**

## Appendix C

### Participant Identification Email

Date

Dear SWACUHO CHOs,

I am writing to seek your assistance in identifying potential participants for a study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington under the supervision of Dr. James Hardy.

Residence directors play a significant role in the success of an on-campus housing program or department (Horvath & Stack, 2013). While there are several types of employment turnover, there are also turnover costs (Allen et al., 2010). “When turnover is high, units lose efficiency, consistency, and quality in the delivery of services, as well as the investment made in the knowledge base of the institution or unit” (Rosser & Javinar, 2003, p. 825). Turnover also disrupts staff teamwork, cohesion, and morale (Allen et al., 2010), which makes it harder if not impossible to successfully achieve university goals. The lack of staff cohesion can cause animosity within the staff group, which leads to fragmentation of the group (Corey & Corey, 2006). While costs and impact of turnover remain high, there is no research exploring residence directors’ perceptions of a departure of one of their colleagues.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand residence directors’ perceptions of a departure of one of their colleagues. This qualitative study will look at residence directors at four-year institutions who have experienced a departure of a coworker within the same academic year. Although previous studies have examined residence directors’ recruitment and retention, this study is unique in that it will examine the perceptions of the staff members who remained or were left behind at the institution.

I need your assistance identifying residence directors who will have been employed for one or more academic years at your institution and have experienced the departure of a residence director colleague during the previous year. Their participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately 60-90 minutes to take place in a mutually agreed upon location (face-to-face or Skype). All information they provide will be completely confidential.

Please respond to this email with a list of potential participants and their email addresses by (date).

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in identifying participants, please contact me at (817) 875-8977 or by email at mari@uta.edu.

I hope that the results of my study will be of benefit to you, the residence directors who participate in the study or those who face staff departures, as well as to the broader residence life field.

I very much look forward to hearing from you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

Mari K. Duncan  
Doctoral Student  
Education Leadership and Policy Studies  
The University of Texas at Arlington

## **Appendix D**

### **Participant Demographic Questionnaire and Consent Form**

## Appendix D

### Participant Demographic Questionnaire and Consent Form

#### Start of Block: Default Question Block

What is your name?

---

What is your highest level of education?

- ☐ Bachelor's degree (4)
- ☐ Master's degree (5)
- ☐ PhD or EdD (6)

How many years of professional residence director experience do you have?

---

What is the name of the university/college where you are employed?

---

How many years have you been employed at your current university/college?

---



What is your university's/college's total enrollment?

---

What is the total number of students that you house on-campus?

---

How many residence directors are employed in your department?

---

How many residents live in your building or community?

---

How many resident assistants do you supervise?

---

How many graduate assistant residence directors do you supervise?

---

How many office/desk assistants do you supervise?

---

How many years and months (ex. 2 years and 3 months) did you work with the residence director who departed?

---

I understand the above information and with full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study:

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

I agree to have my interview digitally recorded:

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any dissertation or publication that comes from this research:

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

## **Appendix E**

### Participant Invitation Email

## **Appendix E**

### **Participant Invitation Email**

Date

Dear (Participant's Name):

I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington under the supervision of Dr. James Hardy. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand residence directors' perceptions of a departure of one of their colleagues. This qualitative study will look at residence directors at four-year institutions who have experienced a departure of a coworker within the same academic year.

As a residence director who has been employed for one or more academic years at your institution and who has experienced the departure of a residence director colleague during the previous year, you have been identified as meeting the criteria of my study. Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately 60-90 minutes in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location (face-to-face or Skype). You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study by advising the researcher at any time without any negative consequences. With your permission, the interview will be digitally recorded to facilitate collection of information and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. All information you provide is completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any dissertation or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at (817) 875-8977 or by email at mari@uta.edu.

That this study has been reviewed and has received ethics clearance through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Texas at Arlington. However, the final decision about participation is yours.

Please respond to this email by (date) to notify me whether or not you are interested in participating. If you are interested, an electronic questionnaire will be emailed to you to gather demographic data and informed consent. The questionnaire should take three to five minutes to

complete. Once you have completed the questionnaire, I will contact you to schedule the interview.

I hope that the results of my study will be of benefit to you and the other residence directors who face staff departures, as well as to the broader residence life field.

I very much look forward to hearing from you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

Mari K. Duncan  
Doctoral Student  
Education Leadership and Policy Studies  
The University of Texas at Arlington

## **Appendix F**

Participant Demographic Questionnaire and Informed Consent Invitation Email

## **Appendix F**

### **Participant Demographic Questionnaire and Informed Consent Invitation Email**

Date

Dear Participant,

Thank you for volunteering to participate in the individual residence director interviews. The information you provide will help me further understand your perceptions of the departure of your colleague. In order for me to further my research, I will need to gather some information about you and ask for consent. Please note that this information will be kept confidential and no links will be made directly to you in the written study. The questionnaire should take you three to five minutes to complete.

**Follow this link to the Survey:**

[\\${1://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

[\\${1://SurveyURL}](#)

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:

[\\${1://OptOutLink?d=Click here to unsubscribe}](#)

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