The Professionalization of Collegiate Recreation and the Educational Pathways of its Practitioners: An Exploratory Study

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The Professionalization of Collegiate Recreation and the Educational Pathways of its Practitioners: An Exploratory Study

A Dissertation Presented

By

JASON R. INCORVATI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2023

College of Education
The Professionalization of Collegiate Recreation and the Educational Pathways of its Practitioners: An Exploratory Study

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JASON R. INCORVATI

Approved as to style and content by:

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Ezekiel Kimball, Chair

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Elizabeth Williams, Member

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Matthew Katz, Member

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Shane Hammond
Associate Dean for Student Success
College of Education
DEDICATION

To my mom, whose belief in me fostered a life-long passion for learning.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The road towards completing this project has been unexpectedly long. I would like to thank my advisor, Zeke Kimball, for his patience and support throughout the dissertation process. I completed my comprehensive exams in the summer of 2018 and immediately was thrust into some professional challenges that stymied my progress. In the fall of 2019, I had my first child and in March 2020, the world stopped and again, I was thrown off course. After several bouts of imposter syndrome, I was always one conversion with Zeke away from feeling better about my abilities and the road ahead.

I want to thank Liz Williams for agreeing to be on my committee and for always lending an ear and offering to meet with me regularly as I got started to help keep me accountable. I want to thank Matt Katz for agreeing to serve on my committee and helping shape the direction I ultimately went in post-proposal.

I want to acknowledge the support I had received from the department of Recreation and Wellbeing at the University of Massachusetts Amherst to pursue a doctorate. First, from Director Emeritus Zulma Garcia, who allowed me to pursue a doctorate degree in the midst of a major building project. That first attempt would end in rejection, but then Director Emeritus John Blihar, allowed me the chance to pursue it again four years later. Finally, I also want to thank Director Steve Bobbitt, who was supportive of me taking the paid time off necessary to get this over the finish line.

I want to thank colleague Joshua Dietrich, who read through some early writing while I was taking my first graduate level course in eight and a half years. I was very concerned I would not receive the necessary ‘A’ to formally apply to the program and
perhaps ask for a recommendation. Looking back, it was not about the writing, but the support he provided that helped alleviate a stressful application process.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the supportive nature and impact of the Higher Education cohort of 2014. Genia Bettencourt, Joshua Bittinger, Diep Luu, and Erin Valencik, all taught me so much throughout our course work together. You all made that part both enjoyable and extremely valuable!

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my family. Thank you to my in-laws Bev and Laurie, who have provided mountains of support and watched our son Duncan on several occasions so that I could work on this. I want to thank my dad, whose belief in me and my ability to complete this never wavered, no matter the circumstances. Thank you to wife Leigh, who remained patient throughout the process, even when things were frustratingly slow moving. I want to thank my son Duncan for allowing me to leave the house to “write my paper,” on weekends and youngest son Calder, for timing his arrival with just enough of a window to let me finish. I love you all so much!
ABSTRACT

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF COLLEGIATE RECREATION AND THE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS OF ITS PRACTITIONERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

SEPTEMBER 2023

JASON R. INCORVATI, B.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
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The professionalization of collegiate recreation, like many fields, has led to attempts to standardize training, create shared language, come to an agreement amongst practitioners on what essential knowledge the work should be based upon, and have collective understanding as to how new members to the field should be socialized (e.g., Arminio, 2011; Duran & Allen, 2020; Wilensky, 1964). Professional associations for student affairs practitioners list knowledge of student development theories as a core competency necessary to be successful in their respective roles (ACPA/NASPA, 2016). Although collegiate recreation is a common student affairs department unit and student development theory has a prominent role in its professional association’s list of core competencies (NIRSA, 2009), the professional socialization of collegiate recreation practitioners is likely to differ from those of other student affairs practitioners. In contrast to most other student affairs practitioners, who typically earn master’s degrees in higher education, student affairs, and/or college student personnel (MED-HESA) (Miles, 2013), aspiring collegiate recreation practitioners have historically not been advised to acquire a
MED-HESA degree and the latest literature that addresses this in even cursory ways is well over two decades old (Aiken, 1993; Patchett et al. 1997). This misalignment of critical knowledge acquisition and educational pathways has profound implications for the collegiate recreation profession.

The following study utilized a two-phased mixed methods explanatory design. First a quantitative survey design was used to explore the personal and professional contexts of collegiate recreation practitioners, their educational pathways, their knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory, additional factors that may influence their use of student development theory in practice, regional differences amongst the professionalization of the field, and factors that may influence advice they may give prospective collegiate recreation practitioners entering graduate school. The second phase utilized qualitative semi-structured interviews to assist with the interpretation of the data collected before the Covid-19 Pandemic and now in the context of changes to the hiring environment in higher education (Cook & Lord, 2022; Jiskrova, 2022; Powers et al., 2022).
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Through the process of professionalization, occupational fields can create consistency amongst their delivery of services, create codified standards, and garner more access to resources as credibility of the field increases (Wilensky, 1964). In the mid-1990's most collegiate recreation departments, while continuing to professionalize in the higher education landscape, moved away from reporting to varsity athletics and towards student affairs (Milton, 2008). Meanwhile, student affairs’s professionalization included a decade’s long history of using student development theory to underpin the work that practitioners do (e.g., Bloland et al., 1994; Patton et al., 2016). Collegiate recreation followed suit and formally began listing knowledge of student development theory as a core competency in 2009 (NIRSA, n.d.). However, most collegiate recreation practitioners do not enter traditional student affairs graduate preparatory programs (MED-HESA) where much of this essential knowledge acquisition takes place (Ortiz et al., 2015). The most recent study indicated that directors of collegiate recreation programs did not believe that MED-HESA degrees were important (Patchett et al., 1997), and those hiring practitioners do not place much emphasis on degree of the prospective employees (Schneider et al., 2006). Instead, collegiate recreation practitioners know (even if no empirical data exists) it is much more common for prospective members of the field to acquire a graduate degree in their collegiate recreation specialty such as kinesiology for fitness or sport management for intramural sports. Further, the lack of recent literature on the personal and professional characteristics of collegiate recreation practitioners compounds the misalignment of core competencies and lived experiences of
practitioners. The consequences of the misalignment could threaten the professionalization of collegiate recreation. This study explores the relationship between practitioner’s educational pathways, their personal and professional characteristics, and views of student development theory using a 38-item survey and semi-structured interviews.

**Background**

Over eight million students participate in collegiate recreation activities and/or utilize collegiate recreation services and facilities in the United States annually (NIRSA, n.d.). The collegiate recreation departments that support these students are commonly comprised of functional sub-units including intramural and club sports, fitness, outdoor recreation, aquatics, youth programs (camps), and facility operations. The size and scope of each program varies in different institutional contexts based on enrollment and institutional resources (McFadden & Molina, 2016). In addition to offering a wide range of programs, the field of collegiate recreation has become increasingly focused on health and wellbeing (NIRSA, 2020). These concepts are often woven into the mission of the departments (McFadden & Molina, 2016). Moreover, participation in collegiate recreation has been shown to correlate positively with student success outcomes (e.g., Danbert et al., 2014; Huesman et al., 2007, Kampf et al., 2018; Mayers, Wilson, & Potwarka, 2017; McElveen & Rossow, 2014). Forrester (2015) found that most students believed that increased participation provided opportunities to learn transferable skills that could be used after college. Students that participate in collegiate recreation programming and/or utilize collegiate recreation facilities report improved soft skills including time management, respect for others, academic performance, sense of belonging/association, ability to multitask, ability to develop friendships, group
cooperation skills, communication skills, multicultural awareness, and problem-solving skills (Forrester, 2015).

Although professional staff are directly accountable for the programs, services, and facilities utilized, most collegiate recreation programs rely on a large student workforce (McFadden & Molina, 2016). In fact, collegiate recreation departments are one of the biggest student employers on many campuses (Bower et al., 2005). Student jobs include lifeguards, referees, member services and facility staff, group fitness instructors, personal trainers, and outdoor recreation facilitators, in addition to various leadership roles (Tingle et al., 2013; Turner et al., 2005). It is common for students to be involved in the hiring, training, scheduling, and evaluation of their peers (Torpenzer et al., 2011). The potential benefits for student employees include learned or enhanced transferable skills, career preparation, and leadership development (Bolton & Rosselli, 2017; Hall 2013; Tingle et al., 2013). It is also most often the first step in a future career in collegiate recreation (McFadden & Molina, 2016). Because practitioners rely on the student workforce to carry out the mission of these departments, the holistic development of student employees is a major focus of most collegiate recreation practitioners’ jobs.

Recognizing how deeply intertwined collegiate recreation practitioners are in the overall experiences and learning of undergraduate college students, researchers and professional associations alike have stated that knowledge of student development theory is a critical component of being a competent student affairs and collegiate recreation professional (ACPA/NASPA, 2015; NIRSA, 2009; Patton et al., 2016). Despite the seeming intersections of student affairs work, student development, and collegiate recreation, we know relatively little about the lived realities of collegiate recreation
practitioners and the contexts they work in. The most recent study to explore the
reporting relationships of collegiate recreation departments found that more than 75% of
them reported to student affairs (Stier et al., 2010), and since the completion of that
study, the number of collegiate recreation departments reporting to student affairs has
likely grown as old reporting models continue to dwindle. For example, the two of the
bigger holdouts in the northeast, the University of Connecticut and the University of
Massachusetts Amherst changed reporting lines from varsity athletics to student affairs in
2014 and 2015, respectively. However, compared to research about student affairs work
more broadly, not much is known about collegiate recreation practitioners, their
educational pathways, and knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development
theory. Given the potential impact collegiate recreation departments can have on college
students, it is important to learn more about the practitioners who are training the
frontline student workers. The student workers not only provide access to programs,
services, and facilities, but serve as touchpoints in college students' lives and help create
the environments they experience.

Problem Statement

The NASPA/ACPA (2015) and NIRSA (2009) agree that knowledge of student
development theory is critical to the success of student affairs and collegiate recreation
practitioners, respectively. The problem is most collegiate recreation practitioners have
historically been told to acquire a degree that does not include discussions of student
development theory (Patchett et al., 1997). While there are some methods that
practitioners can attempt to maximize the development of their employees, the efficacy of
their efforts and the reasons why practitioners should adopt these practices may seem
elusive if the misalignment of core competencies and lived experiences of practitioners is
pervasive. If there are enough professional development opportunities to overcome the lack of essential theoretical knowledge gained through their non-MED-HESA degree program, then why do student affairs scholars advocate for MED-HESA preparatory degrees (e.g., Jones & Abes, 2011; Ortiz et al., 2015; Patton et al., 2016)? Unfortunately, there have not been many studies on collegiate recreation practitioners and fewer still about how their educational pathways (Lopez et al., 2020), environments, and experiences may influence how they practice, how they mentor prospective graduate students, and what their level of knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory is.

Research Need

Clearly more research is needed to address fundamental questions such as: What do we know about collegiate recreation practitioners? What career preparation and educational pathways do prospective practitioners in the field take? Do all degree pathways provide adequate training and the knowledge acquisition of student development theory necessary to meet the competency standards? Do collegiate recreation practitioners believe knowledge of student development theory is necessary to be successful in their roles? What impact might educational pathways have on how collegiate recreation practitioners engage in practice, specifically on how they mentor students entering the field? Are there other influences at play? By answering these questions, we will be better able to effectively train new collegiate recreation practitioners (and therefore also student employees), create opportunities for collegiate recreation practitioners to engage in dialogue across student affairs divisions about student development theory, and allow the field to engage in future scholarship that explores whether the standards are meeting intended outcomes.
Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the practitioners in collegiate recreation, their educational pathways, professional contexts they work in, and what pathways they suggest for prospective practitioners and their knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory. The primary innovation is collecting baseline data about collegiate recreation practitioners for which truly little exists. In addition, this dissertation will explore gatekeeper access to critical data, and provide methodological considerations for future studies. The research questions are:

1) What are the personal and professional characteristics of collegiate recreation practitioners?

2) What is the knowledge of and perceived usefulness of student development theory amongst collegiate recreation practitioners?

3) Is the knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory related to personal and professional characteristics?

4) What degree do collegiate recreation practitioners think a prospective graduate student should acquire if seeking a career in collegiate recreation?

5) To what extent are personal and professional characteristics of collegiate recreation practitioners related to the degree collegiate recreation practitioners think a prospective graduate student should acquire?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to provide consistency and proper context throughout this study:

Practitioner
A practitioner refers to all (full-time, post undergraduate degree) members of a particular occupational field (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

**Professional**

A professional refers to a practitioner trained to conduct the work of an occupational field, complies with standards and norms associated with it, and has committed long term to it. In addition, professionals are obligated to be concerned about the future growth and stability of the profession, who will be new members and how they will become prepared to practice. (Arminio, 2011). Lastly, I suggest a professional must have some undefined length of service to account for the experiential requirements.

**Field**

A field or an occupational field may or may not be a profession but is what all practitioners belong to within a particular subset of the workforce (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

**Profession**

A field or occupation that has met the following criteria is a profession:

- A systematic theory and body of knowledge on which the work is based
- Work that is relevant to the values of society
- A significant amount of required specialized training that involves the manipulation of ideas and symbols rather than or in addition to physical objects
- An understanding of the values, norms, and conceptions of the workplace subculture
- An emphasis on service and public good as primary work goals
- Autonomy in dictating qualifications for entrance and how performance is judged
- Full-time work group members who possess long-term commitments and compelling interests in the profession
- A community, common identity, and common destiny, including agreed-upon role definitions for members, a common language of the profession that is only partly understood by nonmembers, some power over members, and a system for socialization of new members into the profession
**Professionalization**

The process by which a field tries to become a profession and/or a profession tries to maintain its status (e.g., Arminio, 2011; Hevel, 2016; Wilensky, 1964). For this study's purposes, it is also understood that professionalization can be an ongoing process that includes a continuum by which a field or occupation can move forwards or backwards.

**Collegiate Recreation**

Collegiate Recreation is a unit or department of higher education institutions that often includes functional sub-units such as intramural and club sports, fitness, outdoor recreation, aquatics, youth programs (camps), and facility operations (McFadden & Molina, 2016).

**MED–HESA**

MED–HESA stands for master's in education – Higher Education/Student Affairs, but also could include College Student Personnel degrees for this study.

**Essential Knowledge**

Knowledge deemed critical to have acquired to practice competently. Often essential knowledge is highlighted through professional competencies that place importance on buckets of experiential knowledge and/or theoretical knowledge, and skills.

**Student Development**

Student development is a student’s progress towards a holistic and better-rounded version of themselves. Often conflated with student development theory which is a broad umbrella for formal theories of how students develop (Bloland et al., 1994).

**Educational Pathway**
Educational pathway refers to the specific master’s degree a practitioner or prospective practitioner has or will acquire. It may also include whether an individual worked as a graduate assistant or graduate intern (like a graduate assistant without the typical tuition waiver).

**Positionality**

I have been a collegiate recreation practitioner for the past 18 years. I earned my master’s in sport management from the University of Florida in 2005. At that time, sport management was the degree that the graduate assistants for intramural sports were encouraged to take at the University of Florida, but this was widespread practice in the field (Patchett et al., 1997). I learned useful knowledge about facility design, trends within recreation, and sport law and risk management. All of which were important components of my first two roles as a practitioner. I have mentored 23 students in their pursuit of graduate assistantships within collegiate recreation. I believe I have seen a small shift in the degrees being encouraged by different collegiate recreation departments as student affairs values continue to be increasingly embedded in the work of collegiate recreation practitioners (Keeling, 2006). Although I have long held many informal beliefs of student development, it was not until I began my doctoral studies that many of these informal buckets of knowledge were either confirmed, rejected, or tweaked to align with formal theory.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature review topics include: (a) Professions and Professionalization; (b) Usefulness of Student Development Theory; (c) History and the Professionalization of Collegiate Recreation; (d) Knowledge Gaps, and (e) Summary.

Professions and Professionalization

Fields such as Student Affairs and Collegiate Recreation claim to be professions, but are they, and why does it matter? Arminio (2011) based a list of eight criteria for an occupation to be considered a profession on the early works of Pavalko (1971), Penney (1972), Rhoades (2007), and Wilensky (1964):

- A systematic theory and body of knowledge on which the work is based
- Work that is relevant to the values of society
- A significant amount of required specialized training that involves the manipulation of ideas and symbols rather than or in addition to physical objects
- An understanding of the values, norms, and conceptions of the workplace subculture
- An emphasis on service and public good as primary work goals
- Autonomy in dictating qualifications for entrance and how performance is judged
- Full-time work group members who possess long-term commitments and compelling interests in the profession
- A community, common identity, and common destiny, including agreed-upon role definitions for members, a common language of the profession that is only partly understood by nonmembers, some power over members, and a system for socialization of new members into the profession
- A code of ethics (p. 469-470)

The criteria leave a lot of gray area in measuring an occupation’s successful path to becoming a profession. And if ascertaining whether an occupation is indeed a profession is tied to subjective measures on a continuum, then many occupations may struggle to gain institutional support. This is especially true if the current narrative around their work is not deemed important on a societal level. The process of becoming a profession, or ‘professionalization’ of an occupation, is commonly used throughout literature to reflect this ambiguity (e.g., Arminio, 2011; Hevel, 2016; Wilensky, 1964). However, where an occupation is on the professionalization continuum is not necessarily tied whether they have fully realized status as a profession (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). One could argue that on-going professionalization is necessary to maintain status as a profession. As society and standards change, so must an occupation to meet that evolving context to remain relevant.

This importance of professionalization cannot be understated. By adopting standards that professionals will strive to meet, the profession can achieve higher quality outcomes for those the profession serves. Indeed, early adopters of a professionalization movement typically become focused on training and practice to provide consistency and standardization of their field (Wilensky, 1964). Law and teaching at universities were two of the first occupations which have become professions since the Middle Ages. Medicine
went through a major reform at the start of the 20th century. Wilensky (1964) noted the field focused in on “the physical and natural sciences along with high, rigorously defined, and enforced standards of training designed to impart that body of knowledge” (p. 138). Perhaps the oldest profession, the ministry, is another field of work that requires intense training and codified systems of knowledge needed for practice, even if that knowledge is not scientific (Wilensky, 1964).

In higher education, often the organizing through conferences, the birth of professional associations, and the first scholarship about the work an organization engages in are beginning steps towards professionalization. These steps give rise to the sharing of ideas and professional standards (Hevel, 2016). Further, socializing prospective and new professionals is also a key step on the professionalization continuum (Duran & Allen, 2020; Wilensky, 1964). This socialization includes adopting the behavioral norms and learning the exclusive language and technical skills required of new members and may help retain practitioners (Duran & Allen, 2020). The socialization process is often done through graduate preparatory work and through affiliation with professional associations (Duran & Allen, 2020). Socialization enables practitioners to further the profession's mission, which is part of what it means to be a professional (Arminio, 2011). The improved service provided by the profession will allow its reach to grow beyond the membership and garner more public and institutional support (Wilensky, 1964).

**Student Affairs as a Profession**

Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) argued that student affairs is a profession and McGill et al. (2021) suggest it has not yet achieved profession status because of multitude
of contexts that make each student affairs division at a university so unique (as I will explain below). However, professionalization is not a linear process (Hevel, 2016). In fact, there are multiple potential threats to an occupation’s status as a profession. Wilensky (1964) identified two of these potential major barriers to professionalization. The first is that certain complex organizational contexts threaten autonomy and the service ideal of the profession. The second is the essential knowledge that the profession is based on can be problematic. He explained the ideal essential knowledge, “In short, there may be an optimal base for professional practice—neither too vague nor too precise, too broad nor too narrow” (p. 148). Student Affairs has a complex organizational structure and there is considerable scholarly debate around the value of the essential knowledge the work is based on (Torres et al., 2019), in this case Student Development Theory (e.g., Bloland, 1994; Love, 2012; Parker 1974; Rogers, 1995). Further, McGill et al. (2021) identified five of these threats they called ‘tensions’ of professionalization of student affairs; lack of specialized knowledge (what I refer to as essential knowledge unique to the profession), lack of unified purpose and focus, divided professional community with the existence of two student affairs professional associations, diversity of student affairs credentialing, and lack of autonomy for student affairs practitioners at both the individual and organizational levels.

The ever-shifting portfolio of student affairs offices challenges the notion there can be a unified purpose and focus. Some divisions of student affairs include the health center and campus police while others do not. Indeed, some offices have changed reporting lines back and forth between the same campus divisions over time. Other offices may have split reporting lines between two divisions. Some have suggested
because of the diversity of roles in student affairs, it can never truly be one profession (McGill et al., 2021). In addition to the existence of ACPA College Student Educators International (created in 1924) and NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (created in 1918) for practitioners to identify with and divide the professional community, the introduction of subfields, such as residential life, new student orientation, or student engagement, has acerbated this problem. Practitioners within these different subfields of student affairs contribute to a divided professional community when they identify and engage more frequently with their subfield’s association, such as collegiate recreation’s NIRSA, rather than identify as a student affairs practitioner.

Further, because student affairs divisions are placed within a larger institutional context, student affairs divisions will never have complete autonomy to determine the language to describe the work the staff do. The division was created to serve the institution and students. Institutional goals and priorities vary widely from institution to institution, so the guiding principles directing the work are nested within the larger organizational context (McGill et al., 2021). While professional development and a student affairs licensure or credentials are practical solutions to the disparate professional contexts that student affairs work is done in, the lack of a consistent focus or purpose for student affairs practitioners and autonomy for them to determine said purpose remains a real threat to the professionalization of the field (McGill et al., 2021).

Role of Practitioners in Professionalization

What is the role of a student affairs practitioner in the field's professionalization? Are traditional ways of thinking about the role of student affairs professionals in the process of professionalization still relevant in the current pandemic-concurrent
employment context? I argue the definition of a professional needs to be reexamined at the very least. Arminio (2011) defined a professional as someone trained to conduct the work of a profession, complies with standards and norms associated with it, and has committed long term to it. In addition, Arminio (2011) argued:

...being a professional necessitates a commitment to a more specific knowledge base and particular skill sets, and values. Choosing a profession assumes a commitment to not only an occupation but also to the principles that guide a professional and the profession itself. (p. 469)

Further Arminio (2011) indicated that professionals are obligated to be concerned about the future growth and stability of the profession, who will become new members and how they will become prepared to practice.

In the pandemic-concurrent hiring environment, less experienced practitioners are being hired. It is therefore plausible that practitioners may not be trained to conduct the work and the training must take place during a more extensive on-boarding process. In addition, while Generation Z has had the ability to find information on their own through digital means, this may have resulted in a generation that will challenge established norms and standards before fully adopting them (Katz et al., 2021). Furthermore, with the “Great Reshuffle,” increasing amounts of people are reevaluating one’s current job (Cook & Lord, 2022). Long-term commitment to the profession in this context may be aspirational, but less realistic. Similarly, many new practitioners may be excited to start their new careers, but because they are not committed to working in the profession long-term, their interest in the long-term viability of the profession may be limited, if even thought about at all. Arminio (2011) may not be wrong about what a professional is, but
that definition cannot apply to all practitioners within a field. Therefore, I suggest adding an element to Arminio’s definition: A particular length of service that would ensure at least some previous commitment, experience gained, opportunity to be trained in the skills, norms, and standards of the profession, in addition to opportunities to obtain a role in the socialization process of new members. Even then, a practitioner who is siloed, does not adhere to norms and/or avail themselves of professional development opportunities may fall outside of this definition. A well-thought-out credentialing process for more experienced members may help identify professionals within collegiate recreation, but only if those seasoned practitioners all have access to and are motivated to engage with the process. NASPA and several student affairs professional organizations have launched a new credentialing program for experienced practitioners. There is one general student affairs certification in addition offering a separate certification for specific domains, such as collegiate recreation (NIRSA, n.d.).

Attirion

Although related to other barriers, no list of threats to professionalization is complete without exploring the attrition of members of the profession. Specifically, within student affairs this has been a problem for generations (Lorden, 1998). Multiple scholars have indicated as much as 50-60% of student affairs practitioners leave the field within five years (e.g., Lorden, 1998; Naifeh & Kearney, 2021). As practitioners leave, it costs money and time to train new practitioners who also lack institutional knowledge. However, Lorden (1998) noted it has been argued that some attrition is necessary because of the limited upward mobility pathways for practitioners. In addition, the transferable skills practitioners take to other industries become important in establishing the field’s
creditability as a profession (Lorden, 1998). When Lorden authored the article *Attrition in the Student Affairs Profession* in 1998 and when Naifeh and Kearney (2021) found equivalent results from 2019 data, we had not yet experienced the upheaval the recent events surrounding the Covid-19 Pandemic had created. Previously, when people left student affairs positions, there were graduates from student affairs preparatory programs to recruit who also were often graduate assistants in the field. When the pandemic happened, the experiential opportunities that these positions traditionally offered were changed dramatically. Some positions were either cut due to budgetary reasons or eliminated because the nature of the position was no longer feasible with limits on in-person activities (Powers et al., 2022). Combine this with practitioners in all fields reevaluating their relationship with their current occupation (Jiskrova, 2022) and you have individuals leaving with no one with the previously desired experience able to replace them. The tension the attrition creates currently puts pressure on professional associations, divisions of student affairs, and subfields to reevaluate their hiring practices, onboarding processes, and what truly is essential knowledge necessary to do the work.

**Essential Knowledge**

It is this lack of essential knowledge unique to the field that may be the most problematic of the threats. McGill et al. (2021) contended that student affairs graduate preparatory programs are often tied to other disciplines such as higher education, social justice, college student personnel, and adult education. Further, student affairs practitioners already have an uneasy relationship with theory, and most do not contribute to or use it in their daily practice (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). Many are skeptical of theory’s role in daily practice because the authors of such theories often lack the lived
experience of a student affairs practitioner (Torres et al., 2019). Further, staying on top of
the growing multitude of ever-changing theories has made the job of a student affairs
practitioner even more complex (Torres et al. 2019). Scholarship often falls short of
translating well to for the intended audience of student affairs practitioners (Torres et al.,
2019) and practitioners may simply not have the time to read it (Carpenter & Stimpson,
2007). Torres et al, (2019) argued that scholars need to provide research in ways in that
practitioners can more easily digest and Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) called for
practitioners to lend their voices to more of the literature around their work. Having said
that, student affairs professional associations commonly list knowledge of student
development theory among its baseline professional competencies (ACPA & NASPA,
2016 NIRSA, n.d.), suggesting student development theory is essential knowledge to
practice.

All of the aforementioned tensions beg the question on whether more focus
should be placed on the subfields when determining whether an occupation is a
profession rather than the loosely defined student affairs (McGill et al., 2021). Before I
explore the history and professionalization of collegiate recreation, I will answer the
question whether student development theory should be considered essential knowledge
for departments housed in student affairs.

**Usefulness of Student Development Theory in Student Affairs Practice**

Student Development is a difficult to define concept (Bloland, Stamatakos, &
Rogers, 1994). Researchers and practitioners alike almost all agree student development
is positive (Patton et al., 2016), but depending on the context student development can
have multiple meanings (Reason & Renn, 2008). As Reason and Renn (2008) suggested,
the lack of a consensus definition for student development leaves a rich arena of undiscovered enlightenment, but this discovery is well beyond the scope of this review. For this review, I define student development as a student’s progress towards a holistic and better-rounded version of themselves. As students engage with their environment inside and outside of the classroom, they begin to accumulate knowledge and develop, hone, and/or refine certain transferable skills. These skills enable the students to increase their access and readiness to new forms of knowledge, both curricular and experiential based, that will in turn create new opportunities for learning and development. As practitioners, we can use student development theory to attempt to maximize the potential for student development (Patton et al., 2016).

**Theory and Informal Theory**

Love (2012) describes theory on a continuum in the following way: At one end, there is the meaning of theory that focuses narrowly on a belief, assumption, or conjecture about some single phenomenon. Theory in this circumstance can be based on limited information, knowledge, or experience. At the other end of the continuum, theory is viewed as a set of principles, or theorems, which attempt to explain the phenomena in question, guide behavior, or produce results. Although it is tempting to assume that informal theory anchors one end of this continuum and formal theory the other, there are exceptions (e.g., experienced professionals having complex informal theories). So, to state the obvious, both informal theories and formal theories are theories. They both are attempts at making sense of complex data and situations. They both attempt to explain, predict, and influence phenomena. (p. 179)
According to the APA (American Psychological Association) Dictionary of Psychology (n.d.), formal theory is a paradigm or a group of rules or laws, and assumptions that explain phenomena. Love (2012) believed there were at least three distinct levels of applying formal theory to practice. The first level is the amount of someone’s work with another individual or group of people that utilizes formal theory in their daily practice. The second level involves the degree in which someone’s work is intentionally tied to formal theory, or the degree in which someone’s work is intentionally tied to research for the development of a program designed for a specific audience (e.g., training student workers, educational interventions). Lastly, it is the degree to which the organization uses formal theory to create policies or goals to create actionable steps for people belonging to said unit.

An informal theory is tacit or experiential knowledge used in practice (Love, 2012). In literature many authors have written about a “student development philosophy” that is often confused with student development theory (Love, 2012). I contend that many practitioners sometimes drop the word philosophy altogether further compounding the issue. Thus, for this discussion, I will refer to student development theory as the formal theory and use student development to reference the experiential knowledge practitioners apply in their practice when guiding students.

**Student Development Theory**

Bloland et al. (1994) defined student development theory as “The body of theory and associated concepts that attempts to explain the process of human development as it may apply to the growth and development of college students at any age” (p. vii). However, not all student development theory is based on a representative population
sample. Theories often leave out perspectives from individuals that practitioners often provide much support to (e.g., first generation students, minoritized students, etc.). The foundational studies (e.g., Chickering 1969, Kohlberg, 1969, Marcia, 1966), supporting many student development practices were done of homogenized student populations; often white, affluent students at private or elite public colleges and universities (Patton et al., 2016). Therefore, many of these theories are not applicable to minoritized individuals because of the privileged experiences these student development theories were based on. Later theories were centered on minoritized individuals’ experiences (e.g., Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1979; Dillon et al., 2011; Gilligan, 1981), but the belief that all development of students is similar amongst all students is no longer a widely held belief. The understanding of a multiplicity of experiences and identities has become more salient in the literature, and some have even argued that formal theories are not applicable to individual college students (e.g., Love, 2012; Parker, 1974).

Further, Rogers (1995) criticized student development theory by pointing out there is no agreement in the field as to which student development theory to use in practice. The decision on what theory to use in practice is therefore made at the campus or practitioner level and not made based on the merits of the theories in question. This process has enabled doubters of the utility of student development theory to point out the arbitrariness in which it is applied (Rogers, 1995). Although Rogers (1995) and Bloland et al. (1994) do not advocate for the complete abandonment of student development theory, the view espoused by both favor a return to placing academic and intellectual development as the core tenant of student affairs’s mission. The implication is this path will allow for student affairs to professionalize standards of practice more credibly and
concretely. However, we cannot cast aside the holistic development of the student as a central tenant of student affairs. Without basic needs and the wellbeing of students being attended to, student development (Stebleton et al., 2020) and the student learning Bloland et al. (1994) and Rogers (1995) called for will remain elusive.

**Student Development Theory Concepts**

If we agree that informal theories are not enough to guide our practice competently (Evans & Guido, 2012), then practitioners need research and formal theory to supplement what they have learned. That is not to say that informal theories are not an important part of practitioner knowledge (Evans & Guido, 2012; Love, 2012; Reason & Kimball, 2012), but that informal theory alone cannot make for a successful student affairs practitioner (Evans & Guido, 2012). However, which formal theories should we use if we continue to find contexts to which the student development theories do not apply (Love, 2012; Parker, 1974)? Bloland et al. (1994) argued for a focus on learning and learning theory. Although learning theories are sure to aid practitioners in being successful professionals, are we to believe that these theories are not just as flawed as student development theories? Evans and Guido (2012) suggest that it may not be the theories, but how we are using them that matters. As Love (2012) points out, asking a practitioner to memorize all the stages, vectors, models, and continuums put forth by scholars is not practical or realistic. Evans and Guido (2012) counter this impracticality by proposing that practitioners use concepts and pieces of the theories that align with their current role. This bricolage approach has promise, but unfortunately theory is not often talked about this way at conferences, symposiums, and other professional development workshops. Indeed, it does seem plausible, if not probable, that formal
theory usage would be more palatable to practitioners if they were able to center their own informal theories in their daily practice while not being asked to memorize and map complete formal theories to their specific institutional context.

History and Professionalization of Collegiate Recreation

The beginning of the professionalization of collegiate recreation can be traced back to the early 20th century at Ohio State University and the University of Michigan in 1913 (Colgate et al., 1978) however these programs initially were created to serve the needs of college men. Women participated in intramural and sorority competitions, in addition to intercollegiate activities called “play days,” in the early 20th century (Bell, 2007), but these activities were organized apart from the men’s (Horowitz, 1987; Stewart, 1992) and commonly tied to women’s physical education programs with less resources and separate and smaller facilities (Dudenhoeffer, 1997). Co-recreational activities started becoming more common in the period after World War II as enrollment in higher education institutions increased significantly (Stewart, 1992) and demand for women’s leagues organized alongside the men’s leagues grew in the decades to follow (Dudenhoeffer, 1997).

Students had organized intramural competitions in the early half of the 20th century (Stewart, 1992), however, an increase in demand and safety concerns prompted more administrative oversight (Milton, 2008). Intramural athletic departments often reported to Athletics departments in the early 20th century. The responsibility for the day to day of these early programs sometimes fell to athletic coaches (e.g., NIRSA, 2012; Mitchell, 1925). That model began to change on many campuses when Dr. William Wasson of Dillard University organized an intramural conference in 1950 with 11
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The National Intramural Association (NIA) was born (NIRSA, n.d.). However, NIA did not remain a very inclusive organization for exceptionally long.

Women were dropped from the association in 1959 (NIRSA, n.d.; Varner, 1992). This was an example of how occupations striving to professionalize could inhibit their own progress. Indeed, women’s intramural activities were commonly operated by faculty who moonlighted as women’s athletic administrators within the physical education department. Women’s administrators looked to other professional associations for networking and professional development (Dudenhoeffer, 1997). The physical education departments were associated with the student-led Women’s Recreation Association (WRA) and later called the Athletic and Recreation Federation of College Women (ARFCW). However, women’s intramural and recreation activities were professionally associated with the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (AAHPER). The Division of Girl’s and Women’s Sports (DGWS) was a subset of AAHPER. As the 1960’s went on, the DGWS became more preoccupied with women’s intercollegiate competition. Women’s intramural and recreation administrators need for guidance gave rise to the National Intramural Sports Council (NISC) housed under AAHPER (Dudenhoeffer, 1997). In 1971, ARFCW held its last meeting and on campuses most women’s and men’s physical education departments merged.

Women were voted back in into the NIA in 1971 as co-recreational opportunities on campuses grew (NIRSA, n.d.; Varner, 1992). Many of the women’s athletic administrators moved to college athletic departments following the passage of Title IX and the men’s administrators were now responsible for the women’s recreation programs.
(Dudenhoeffer, 1997). When the deans and men and the deans of women offices merged in student affairs following World War II and the decades to follow, women administrators were subjugated to lesser roles than their men counterparts (Hevel, 2016). The same was true of women’s physical education faculty, department heads, and intramural and recreation administrators that remained (Dudenhoeffer, 1997). I argue that until NIRSA reincorporated women in 1971 and campuses began offer similar opportunities for women and men, collegiate recreation was not a profession. However, both the women’s and men’s programs on campuses had engaged in professionalizing activities that led to both progress and regression. As Dudenhoeffer (1997) notes, the history of women’s collegiate recreation is scant within the literature, and I believe NIRSA, based on the lack of historical detail provided on its website about women’s collegiate recreation (NIRSA, n.d.), has mostly ignored this important history of the field. Perhaps there has been an unintentional or intentional desire to date the birth of collegiate recreation to the early part of the 20th century to give it more creditability and institutional support. The reality is that collegiate recreation was dealing with many challenges in the latter half of the 20th century that marked progress while highlighting the need for more.

Hazel Varner was a woman identified member of NIRSA who joined a panel discussion in 1973 on Title IX. According to Varner (1992), the discussion led to much unease within the organization. Men felt threatened by the legality of the current inequities of women’s and men’s intramural opportunities. New professional women were nervous, and this apprehensiveness manifested between both men and women and between women who were new to the field and more experienced women (Varner, 1992).
Varner (1992) stated that women organized separate networking events and meetings at the national conferences early on, but as the association became more integrated many of these opportunities disappeared. The perception of the utility of affinity spaces may have shifted quite a bit in the last 30 years. Several different identity-based networking opportunities exist within the organization, including for women, to create spaces for professionals with shared identities and lived experiences to come together, network, and support one another.

As time wore on, those responsible for intramural programs were asked to administer not only sport activities but oversee weight room and workout spaces for the campus community (Milton, 2008). As a result, in 1975, the NIA became the National Intramural-Recreation Sports Association or NIRSA (NIRSA, n.d.). In 1977, the first research publication, the NIRSA Journal (later the Recreational Sports Journal) was published, ushering in a new era of professionalization. In 1981, the first collegiate recreation Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was established and that same year NIRSA created their first practitioner credential for collegiate recreation called the Recreational Sports Specialist certification program (CRSS). A code of ethics was established for NIRSA members in 1984. Two years later, the National Office of NIRSA became a full-time operation. In 1989 the Recreational School of Management is first offered as a professional development opportunity through NIRSA. In the decades to follow, both a corporate arm of NIRSA was created to leverage its business interests, called the NIRSA Services Corporation, and also philanthropic arm called the NIRSA Foundation was established. Both entities work to transmit the mission and expand the membership of NIRSA (NIRSA, n.d.).
Although there were outliers like Ohio State University and the University of Michigan that created their own intramural facilities (McFadden & Molina, 2016), many institutions created shared varsity athletic and recreation facilities (Bryant et al., 1994). The popularization of aerobic fitness in the 1980’s created the need for more workout spaces. A subsequent building boom of standalone recreation centers in the 1990’s ushered in a new era of expansion in collegiate recreation. If there were still colleges that held out hiring dedicated recreation staff to this point, the administrative oversight would become too great to overcome. Having multiple dedicated recreation professionals became a critical component of any collegiate recreation department and the physical infrastructure allowed for more programmatic offerings (Milton, 2008).

As this expansion of facilities and staff occurred, reporting relationships also changed at many institutions: collegiate recreation programs reported to athletics for decades, but as they expanded in the second half of the 20th century and athletics administration became increasingly corporatized (R. Smith & R. Smith, 2011), recreation departments increasingly were reorganized as part of student life, which culminated in a mass shift in the 1990’s from athletics to student affairs (Milton, 2008). Although athletic departments remain concerned about the welfare and growth of student athletes, a successful varsity athletic program is often measured in wins and losses. Collegiate recreation programs are more concerned with how engagement in their programs and facilities complement the classroom experience for students (Bryant et al., 1994). As the field reorganized under student affairs and campus life, naturally it took some time for the scholarship in recreation to reflect its new home. However, in 2006, NIRSA joined ACPA, the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International.
(ACUHO-I), the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA), NACADA the Global Community for Academic Advising, and NASPA, to publish *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006).

In 2012, NIRSA became NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation (NIRSA, n.d.).

Today, the functional programming sub-units including aquatics, club and intramural sports, fitness, outdoor recreation or adventure programs, youth programing (camps), and the different collegiate recreation facilities serve over 8 million college students annually (NIRSA, n.d.) Noteworthy is the relationship between participation in collegiate recreation and positive student success outcomes (e.g., Danbert et al., 2014; Huesman et al., 2007; Kampf et al., 2018; Mayers et al., 2017; McElveen & Rossow, 2014). Further, Forrester (2015) concluded that most participants believed that increased involvement in programming and/or use of collegiate recreation facilities can translate to increased opportunities to learn transferable skills that could be used after college. The students also self-reported improved soft skills including, time management, respect for others, academic performance, sense of belonging/association, ability to multitask, ability to develop friendships, group cooperation skills, communication skills, multicultural awareness, and problem-solving skills.

As one of the biggest employers on college campuses (Bower et al., 2005), collegiate recreation departments rely on large student workforces (McFadden & Molina, 2016). These positions include lifeguards, referees, member services and facility staff, group fitness instructors, personal trainers, and adventure programming facilitators. Students are frequently given the opportunity to advance within departments as student leaders (Tingle et al., 2013; Turner et al., 2005). Students often are involved in the hiring,
training, scheduling, and evaluation of their peers (Toperzer et al., 2011). The benefits of employment in collegiate recreation include learned or enhanced transferable skills, career preparation, and leadership development (Bolton & Rosselli, 2017; Hall, 2013; Tingle et al., 2013). Most future collegiate recreation practitioners start their journey in collegiate recreation as students (McFadden & Molina, 2016). Therefore, because of the reliance of the students to provide access to the facilities and programs for their campus communities, the holistic development of student employees is a major component of collegiate recreation practitioners’ jobs.

**Promising Practices in Student Development**

There are several ways that scholars and practitioners suggest how to maximize the benefits for student employees in collegiate recreation. In reviewing the literature, six themes continually emerge from better student development practices: 1) training and outcome assessment, 2) reflection, 3) challenge and support, 4) job enrichment and professional development, 5) community engagement, and 6) student rewards. Student development theory undergirds many of the reasons why these practices are successful.

The training should be on-going and experiential (Bolton & Rosselli, 2017), have continuous feedback mechanisms (Toperzer et al., 2011) and assess intended outcomes (McFadden & Carr, 2015). In addition, the training should involve students training their peers (e.g., Johnson et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2005), utilize technology (Turner et al., 2005), and the job should be structured as a learning experience (e.g., Hackett, 2007; Hall; 2013; Hansen & Hoag, 2018). In addition, providing ample space and time for reflection should be prioritized (e.g., Bolton & Rosselli, 2017; Kuh, 2009; Fresk & Mullendore, 2012; Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Turner et al., 2005; Winkler, 2009). Reflection
can lead to enhanced critical thinking skills, including the ability to communicate what
the student has learned on the job (e.g., Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Kuh, 2009). If
practitioners can articulate the link between a student’s career aspirations to the outcomes
from the job tasks, then the student will frame their experience as more than just a
paycheck (Fresk & Mullendore, 2012).

The student job environment best suited to foster growth is also one that has an
appropriate balance of challenge and support (Sanford, 1966). Students need the room to
make mistakes and learn from those actions without fear of discipline. This “fail forward”
approach can build trust between students and professional staff (Bolton & Rosselli,
2017; Pack et al., 2007). While the support to grow is especially important, so too is the
amount of challenge provided the students (Sanford, 1966, Toperzer et al., 2011). When a
task lacks an appropriate level of challenge for a student, apathy can occur and be
mistaken for a lack of competency. Professional staff should be intentional when creating
the job tasks to find the right balance of challenge and support (Sanford, 1966; Cheng &
Alcántara, 2007).

Job enrichment and/or professional development opportunities for the student
workforce allow professionals to give their students additional learning opportunities
when the routine of a mundane job role may not (e.g., Miller, 1993; Toperzer et al.,
2011). Further, when student employees are engaged within their own department
community, the staff becomes more interdependent (Griffith et al., 2011). The more
interdependent a staff is, the more opportunities for involvement and thus development
(Astin, 1999; Griffith et al., 2011).
Rewards or benefits are also a component of creating a growth environment. Students desire flexibility to work around their class schedules (Johnson et al., 2012). There should be paths to advancement or promotion for those who excel in their roles (Toperzer, 2011). Rewards should encourage the behaviors supervisors desire and that will highlight the department's values (Turner et al., 2005). If student learning and development are departmental values, then incentives should reward students in taking part in those types of initiatives.

**Collegiate Recreation Practitioners**

The above promising practices are based on student development theory. Therefore, engaging with student development theory can aid practitioners in maximizing the learning and development environments for their employees. NIRSA (2022) first listed knowledge of student development theories as part of their core competencies in 2009. A year earlier, in 2008, ACPA and NASPA (2016) published a list of shared professional core competencies. Among these competencies is “a critical understanding of learning and development theories and their use in constructing learning outcomes” (p. 14). The publications suggest that without this knowledge, practitioners will be unsuccessful in their jobs. Burkard et al. (2005) found that student affairs practitioners believed entry-level professionals should base their practice significantly on student development theories. Similarly, Patton et al. (2016) agree:

Student development theory provides the basis for higher education and student affairs practice designed to stimulate growth in students. Knowledge of student development theory enables higher education and student affairs professionals to
identify and address student needs, design programs, develop policies, and create healthy college environments that encourage positive growth in students. (p. 8)

In other words, according to professional organizations, practitioners, and scholars, for student affairs practitioners to be successful and fulfill the mission of their organization, they need access to and engagement with essential knowledge, in this case student development theory.

Traditional student affairs graduate preparatory programs fulfill this competency need by providing the student development theoretical framework that will inform the future practitioner’s work (Ortiz et al., 2015). As much as 87% of student affairs professionals have a traditional student affairs master’s degree (MED-HESA) in student affairs, higher education, or college student personnel (Miles, 2013). Yet most collegiate recreation professionals have been historically advised to get non-MED-HESA degrees (Patchett et al., 1997) such as sport/recreation management or kinesiology to match their functional sub-unit area specialization such as fitness or intramural sports. The NIRSA core competencies do not reference the word “intramural” once. It is clear these competencies were not written in a way that disaggregates the practitioner’s functional sub-unit area specialization.

The pressure to professionalize has created a need for standards to be adopted that do not align with the lived experiences of those in the field. As I have argued, student development theory is important for collegiate recreation professionals to engage with, but the standard does not acknowledge the diversity of educational pathways or potential solutions to the lack of access to this critical information. This misalignment of core competencies and educational pathways for the collegiate recreation profession should be
of concern. Non-MED-HESA degrees such as sport management do incorporate theories in areas of psychology or sociology for example, but student development theory remains a hole in the graduate preparation of non-MED-HESA degree fields for individuals starting a career in collegiate recreation. To be clear, some scholars suggest that student affairs professionals who have MED-HESA degrees also lack knowledge of student development theories or how to use them in real life scenarios (e.g., Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Theory-to-practice models can help bridge the gap (e.g., Kimball & Ryder, 2014; Reason & Kimball, 2012; Ryder & Kimball, 2015), but only for collegiate recreation professionals who are familiar with the field’s theoretical foundations in the first place.

NIRSA gives members access to professional development resources such as the *Recreational Sports Journal*, workshops, symposia, and conferences, but little is known about how these resources are engaged with or how they shape collegiate recreation professionals’ identities as student affairs professionals. Moreover, although student affairs divisions and departments can provide professional development opportunities focused on student development theory, webinars and training can rarely imbue professionals with the foundational knowledge in student development theory. Further, at conferences, professionals need to purposefully seek out opportunities they find important. It remains unclear if collegiate recreation practitioners find student development theory important in their daily practice, even if practitioners indicate student development theory’s importance as a core competency (Beggs, et al., 2018).

**Experiential Pathway**
For nearly all campus recreation practitioners, a student job is the first step into the profession of collegiate recreation (McFadden & Molina, 2016). Students do not come to college aware of the field of collegiate recreation, let alone have thoughts or aspirations of beginning a career in it. However, the pull of continuing to pursue activities they enjoy and paying forward the opportunities they received can be strong. In fact, student development, helping students grow into better versions of themselves, is often the reason that professionals join the field (Bower et al., 2005). Once the student employees realize they would like to pursue a career in collegiate recreation, they typically seek graduate assistantships in collegiate recreation departments post-graduation (Bower et al., 2005; McFadden & Molina, 2016). However, in searches for entry-level collegiate recreation practitioners, the graduate assistantship's specialized experience is emphasized much more than the degree program (Schneider et al., 2006). Although this hiring preference may set new collegiate recreation practitioners up for success in their first job, it could also impede their long-term career progression in student affairs as divisions are more likely to prioritize traditional domains of student affairs knowledge such as student development theory (Gansemer-Topf & Ryder, 2017). As higher education, and subsequently collegiate recreation changes, more attention must be paid to the educational pathways of professionals tasked with the development of the student employees who can improve the wellbeing of the campus community.

Student Involvement in Collegiate Recreation

Mental Wellbeing

Collegiate recreation departments can help ease the demand for counseling centers and positively impact student success by providing access to programs and
activities known to alleviate stress and improve one’s ability to learn (Forrester, 2015). A focus on wellness in recent years reframed recreation activities as more advantageous than engaging the body alone (Sellers et al., 2014). Indeed, as society grapples with a mental health crisis, mental health has become a primary concern for higher education administrators (Cain, 2018). In 2015, 48% of students self-reported on the National College Health Assessment they felt things were hopeless at one point during the last 12 months, 85% felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, over 58% felt very lonely, and 58% felt overwhelming anxiety (ACHA, 2015). Unfortunately, these numbers are getting worse over time. Just a few years later, responding to the same questionnaire, students responded that 53% felt hopeless, 85.5% felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, 63% felt very lonely, and 62% felt overwhelming anxiety (ACHA, 2018). As the mental health crisis continues to worsen, college administrators are increasingly shifting to preventative approaches to fighting the epidemic (Golightly et al., 2017).

**Benefits of Moving**

Physical activity is a predictor of mental wellbeing (Kilani et al., 2020). One of the benefits of collegiate recreation center use is better sleep behaviors. In turn better sleep leads to better overall health indicators and less symptoms such as headaches, chest pain, and fatigue (Guan et al., 2020). Further there is a scientific consensus that exercise improves cognitive function (Nazlieva et al., 2019). Better sleep is associated with improved cognitive function in addition to study concentration and academic performance (Van Der Heijdena et al., 2017). Additional physical benefits include improved cardiovascular health (Trejo-Gutierrez & Fletcher, 2007) and weight control (Berg, 2008). Although acceptance of all body types, shapes, and sizes, is commonly part
of the value system of collegiate recreation programs (NIRSA, n.d.), excess weight is correlated with several negative health indicators (Zheng et al. 2017).

**Holistic Wellbeing**

According to the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.), wellness is “the state or condition of being well or in good health.” Wellness has begun to give way to the broader use of wellbeing on most campuses. Wellbeing is defined as “the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous; physical, psychological, or moral welfare (Oxford, n.d.). Many renovations or new recreation center construction projects now include demonstration kitchens and meditative spaces. Programs have begun to offer nutritional advising and peer well[being] coaches (Strand et al., 2010). Campus partnerships between counseling centers, university health services and recreation departments have become more prevalent (Hartman et al., 2018). Collegiate recreation departments are hiring dedicated wellbeing professionals and either creating strong partnerships or merging with health promotion educators to deliver new programming that augments their traditional offerings (James Madison University, n.d.; North Carolina State University, n.d.). Departments have also highlighted the importance of wellness and (now wellbeing) in their department and building names (e.g., Oklahoma State University, n.d.; University of Maryland, n.d.; University of Wisconsin Madison, n.d.). For example, Oklahoma State University’s collegiate recreation department merged with the campus’s wellness center to become the Department of Wellness. University of Wisconsin Madison’s collegiate recreation department is called University Recreation and Wellbeing.

In 2018, NIRSA and NASPA produced a joint statement: Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education: A Commitment to Student Success (NIRSA, 2020), and this statement
was updated in December 2020. As of 2020, 15 higher education associations, including the American College Counseling Association (ACCA), the American College Health Association (ACHA), ACPA, ACUHO-I, NACA, and NODA, the Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education, among others, have signed onto this statement, highlighting the importance of preventative approaches to addressing the wellbeing of students. The mission from the document states, “We commit to innovating, supporting, and fostering a holistic, integrated, and strategic approach to well-being from the association level to the institutional level” (p. 1). This underscores the notion that tending to holistic wellbeing of students and its link to student success is not the purview of one office or department, but rather must be an integrated approach across department and division lines. The connection to positive student success outcomes with participation in collegiate recreation programs and services, employment and/or use of facilities has strengthened the alignment between the values of student affairs, which has evolved to advocate for the holistic development of students (Baxter Magolda, 2009), and the stated values of many collegiate recreation departments.

Conceptually the interrelatedness of student development, wellbeing, and student success makes sense. Not only is there an integrated approach involving different departments within student affairs, but conceptually an integrated approach to how holistic student learning and development and holistic wellbeing are connected to student success outcomes across the campus. However, we should adopt this conceptual integration in an evidence-based, theory-informed way, and right now, we cannot. Collegiate recreation professionals understand the level of institutional support they are provided is related to these student success outcomes. In addition, the integrated approach
has enhanced the pull of collaborative environments for student affairs divisions. Indeed, collegiate recreation has come a long way from part-time workers rolling out a ball for interested students. University administrators cannot avoid the mounting data on how important recreation programs, services, facilities, and collegiate recreation professionals are to the campus community and their potential positive impact on the student experience and for creating healthy habits after college (Forrester, 2015).

**Gaps in Literature**

Although approximately 75% of collegiate recreation departments or more report to student affairs divisions (Stier et al., 2010), we do not know much about collegiate recreation practitioners and what they know and think of student development theory. The potential misalignment of professional competencies, student affairs and collegiate recreation practitioners’ values, and lived experiences of practitioners continue to threaten the opportunity to provide an integrated approach for growth and wellbeing. The lack of literature on collegiate recreation practitioners is exacerbated by the common framing of the field within a more general sports administrator field (e.g., Jamieson & Toh, 2001; Barcelona & Ross, 2004; Ross & Schurger, 2007). By lumping collegiate recreation professionals in with all sport administrators and without disaggregating the career paths of these vastly distinct types of administrators, much has yet to be learned about collegiate recreation professionals.

**What Do We Know?**

Beggs et al. (2018) studied the perceived importance of core competencies amongst various levels of 466 collegiate recreation professionals. Among the competencies, “philosophy and theory,” was rated as the second highest and there was no
significant difference amongst the different experience levels. Yet amongst all other competencies there were differences amongst the different levels of experience in the profession. Specifically, student development theory was rated remarkably high and amongst the 54 items on the survey, ranked tied for second for most important domain overall. I am surprised by this. Is this the result of response bias? Is it possible for those taking the survey to think that they are supposed to believe it is important and therefore select it as such? Did people read student development theory and conflate it with a student development philosophy? Regardless, this begs follow up questions related to their familiarity with student development theory, how often they use it in practice, and whether their educational pathway prepared them adequately.

Additional studies on collegiate recreation professionals do exist, but are usually studies of directors (e.g., Patchett et al., 1997; Schneider, et al., 2005). Unfortunately, the demographic or attitudinal information gathered is not a good representation of the approximately 2500 NIRSA members. Lopez et al. (2020) used a census survey to ask collegiate recreation professionals about workplace experiences but did not provide insights into their educational pathways or knowledge and views of student development theory. Bowers et al. (2005) believed that entry into the profession was through graduate assistantships and McFadden and Molina (2016) suggested this pathway is common today, but neither provided empirical evidence. Although there has been at least one study about practitioners’ thoughts and/or advice they give prospective future colleagues, it was completed in 1997 and did not report the educational pathways of those participating in the study (Patchett et al., 1997).
Research on advice for prospective graduate students looking to enter the field is limited. On 6/25/21 I did a query for the word, “assistantship,” in titles of articles published in the *Recreational Sports Journal* and it returned only two results. The most recent one was published in 1993. When I queried “graduate,” in titles, nine articles had included it in the title. The most recent articles suggesting educational pathways for prospective graduate students entering the field of collegiate recreation were written in the 1990’s. Aiken (1993) suggested that students choose their graduate degree based on their long-term career goals. Even today, this advice resonates with some because of the bottleneck of available jobs to students within the field. While there are many entry level opportunities available to recent master’s graduates, the opportunities decrease significantly as practitioners look to advance as is the case in lots of higher education fields. In addition, while many student affairs staff may start in a department such as residential life and move to another such as student engagement, most collegiate recreation practitioners do not change specialties within student affairs (although some do change functional sub-units in collegiate recreation). The highly specialized nature of collegiate recreation means that the alternatives for collegiate recreation practitioners are more frequently sought in commercial fitness, municipality recreation, private enterprise, etc. Therefore, it may not be prudent to choose a MED-HESA degree and find oneself without a job in higher education. Conversely, choosing a degree that would give the student the greatest number of options possible may create the most career options in the long term.

Most employers in collegiate recreation have indicated in the past they emphasize the experience the graduate student has in their assistantship over their academic degree.
when hiring (Schneider et al., 2006). However, without more current studies, one must wonder whether that advice is still seen as best given changes in the field and in higher education. Collegiate recreation transitioned away from providing space and simple programing and services long ago (Schneider et al., 2006; Milton, 2008). Collegiate recreation professionals now focus on many of the same topics their student affairs colleagues grapple with, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (Hoang et al., 2016); assessment (Cissik, 2009); and student development (Toperzer et al., 2011).

Consequences of Knowledge Gap

The little we know about collegiate recreation practitioners hinders the profession’s ability to craft professional development opportunities catered to the areas of most need. For example, without understanding the educational pathways, the profession’s ability to tailor continuing educational opportunities suited to an individual’s experience and acquired knowledge is hampered. Further, we do not know whether these educational pathways influence the level of knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory. This is contrasted with the pressure collegiate recreation has faced as a field to professionalize and create standards (or align with standards of their parent field, student affairs) of essential knowledge - a prescribed baseline knowledge of student development theory that is currently deemed necessary for collegiate recreation professionals to be successful in their jobs.

NIRSA has been communicating to their members knowledge of student development theory is a core competency without having much data on educational pathways. NIRSA is presuming practitioners (in aggregate) have access to this knowledge and that the core competency is a reasonable expectation, whether it should be
aspirational. The consequence of this continued presumption, if untrue, is that many practitioners may ignore the core competencies if they deem them unattainable in their current role. It is also plausible that practitioners will not see NIRSA as credible if the practitioner does not believe NIRSA understands their lived experience and how they came to be employed. However, knowledge of student development theory can help practitioners facilitate learning environments (Franklin, 2013) that support holistic wellbeing and foster student success (McFadden & Molina, 2016). Without that knowledge, apathy may be mistaken for lack of competency and compliance may be mistaken for leadership (Sanford, 1966; Kohlberg, 1981). Growth will be stunted, and student employees and participants will fail to reap the full benefits possible.

Understanding the capacity of practitioners to engage with student development theory, whether through their educational pathways, professional development opportunities, or some combination of both, will be important in future strategic planning for the profession and for student affairs divisions alike. It is imperative that student affairs divisions continue to fully integrate collegiate recreation into their overall plans for the student experience. In addition, there may be additional environmental influences that impact how a practitioner practices. Exploring more about whether these different environments may be related to how practitioners practice, including the mentoring of subsequent practitioners, is necessary for the profession to create intentional learning outcomes for the professional development opportunities they create. Lastly, without understanding more about the practitioners in the field, the misalignment between what student affairs practitioners and collegiate recreation practitioners are supposed to know
and the educational pathways of these practitioners may continue to widen and lead to unintended consequences.

Summary

Collegiate recreation has long been held to be a profession (NIRSA, n.d.), but more importantly continues to be in a constant state of professionalizing to adopt standards that will yield desired outcomes for students. There are several threats to professionalizing and several professions, including student affairs, have dealt with these threats (e.g., McGill et al., 2021; Wilensky, 1964). Complex organizational contexts threaten autonomy and the service ideal of the profession (Wilensky, 194). Student affairs is a complex organization, with an ever-changing portfolio and lack of a unified focus and purpose based on institutional context. Further, the professional community is divided not only amongst the many subfields, but amongst the two main professional associations in NASPA and ACPA (McGill et al., 2021). Thus, the push and pull of autonomy of individuals, departments, and of the division to create an integrated approach to student success can be challenging.

Arminio (2011) argued that the role of the professional requires commitment to the profession, and its norms and standards. Further, Arminio (2011) believed that professionals must be concerned about the future growth and stability of the profession. However, a pandemic-concurrent context begs a reexamining of this definition. At the very least a length of service requirement coupled with some standard of engagement may be necessary to determine who is a professional amongst all practitioners in a given field. An intentional credentialing process for more seasoned members of NIRSA may aid in this endeavor, but it will only work if those
members all have access and are motivated to engage in the process. NASPA recently has partnered with several student affairs professional associations, including NIRSA, to launch such a credentialling program geared towards practitioners with a master’s degree and at least five years of work experience in a higher education institution or an extensive amount of work experience if the individual has no master’s degree (NIRSA, n.d.). However, this endeavor does nothing to address current misalignment of core competencies and lived experiences of entry level collegiate recreation practitioners.

Approximately 50% or more of all student affairs practitioners leave the field within five years (e.g., Lorden, 1998; Naifeh & Kearney, 2021). The pandemic has accelerated problems that high attrition rates normally produce. It costs more money to train new employees than it does to retain them (Lorden, 1998). Each time someone leaves, institutional knowledge leaves with them. When practitioners left positions prior to the pandemic, there was a new cohort of graduate master’s students who had served in paraprofessional roles as graduate assistants. The experiential knowledge gained was invaluable for their transition to a practitioner in student affairs. When the pandemic happened, many of these graduate assistant roles were either cut or the roles were reduced greatly because there were no longer in-person activities. The high attrition rates in the current employment context have also led to a lack of hard skills related to the practitioner's subfield. Professional associations, divisions of student affairs, and subfields must reflect on their hiring practices, onboarding processes, and what is really essential knowledge to do the work.
Essential knowledge that the profession bases its work on can neither be too broad or too specific and this knowledge should be unique to the profession (Wilensky, 1964). The field of student affairs has used student development theory to guide their work for decades (e.g., Bloland, 1994; Love, 2012; Parker 1974; Rogers, 1995; Torres et al., 2019). Some believe it is both too broad and many of the underpinnings of the theory are not specific to the field (McGill et al., 2021). This threat to professionalization is coupled with the fact that student development as a construct is difficult to define (Bloland et al., 1994). I defined student development as a holistic growth process a student undergoes towards becoming a more well-rounded version of themselves. As students interact with their environment, opportunities for students to accumulate tacit knowledge and learn transferable skills emerge. Practitioners can use student development theory to maximize the development of their students (Patton et al., 2016).

The usefulness of student development theories has been questioned in its practical applications in varying contexts (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008) and the samples from which some of the foundational theories are based on (Patton et al., 2016). However, by taking a bricolage approach and utilizing various concepts from student development theories, practitioners may find an increased usefulness in formal theory (Evans & Guido, 2012). Instead of remembering all of the models, levels, steps, and vectors, practitioners can gain insight from particular conceptual ideas embedded within these theories. In addition, the practitioners can center the tacit knowledge they have acquired in their practice.
The history and professionalization of collegiate recreation began in the early part of the 20th century but centered the experiences of men. Opportunities for women to recreate on campus often fell to women’s physical education departments who had access to smaller budgets and facilities than did their men counterparts (Dudenhoeffer, 1997). As time wore on, NIRSA became more inclusive of women with the passage of Title IX in 1972, but the history of inequity cannot be overlooked. Collegiate recreation departments often reported varsity athletics through the 1980’s. However, in the 1990’s as varsity athletics were becoming more business focused on college campuses (R. Smith & R. Smith, 2011), collegiate recreation programs began migrating to student affairs and campus life (Milton, 2008). Collegiate recreation began reflecting the values of student affairs more readily in scholarship after Learning Reconsidered 2, which advocated for intentional learning outcomes to be used to create programming initiatives in a myriad of student affairs offices (Keeling, 2006).

In 2009, NIRSA followed ACPA and NASPA, who a year earlier had listed student development theories as part of the core competencies for practitioners. Professional organizations, practitioners, and scholars all concluded that in order for student affairs practitioners and by extension, collegiate recreation practitioners, to be successful in their jobs, they need access and engagement with student development theory (e.g., ACPA & NASPA, 2016; Burkard et al., 2005; NIRSA, 2009; Patton et al, 2016). Most traditional student affairs graduate preparatory programs fulfill this need by providing the student development framework that will inform their work (Ortiz et al., 2015). As much as 87% of student affairs members of NASPA have a
MED-HESA degree (Miles, 2013). However, most collegiate recreation practitioners have not been told to get a MED-HESA degree (Aiken, 1993; Patchett et al., 1997). Although theory to practice models may help can bridge some of the gap in essential knowledge acquisition and lived experience (e.g., Kimball & Ryder, 2014; Reason & Kimball, 2012; Ryder & Kimball, 2015), it is clear there is a misalignment of core competencies and educational pathways that should be examined.

Not much is known about collegiate recreation practitioners. What is known is often of directors and the demographic or attitudinal data are not a good representation of the entire NIRSA membership. Research that provided advice for prospective practitioners dates back over 20 years (Aiken, 1993; Patchett et al., 1997). At the same time, collegiate recreation has become increasingly focused on the holistic wellbeing of students. In 2018, NIRSA joined NASPA to produce a joint statement on the importance of wellbeing (NIRSA, 2020). Within two years, 15 additional organizations formed a coalition of higher education associations. It has become clear that the holistic wellbeing of students and the link to student success is not the responsibility of one office or department. Further, the correlation of positive student success outcomes with participation in collegiate recreation programs and services, employment, and/or use of facilities (e.g., Danbert et al., 2014; Forrester, 2015; Hall, 2013; Huesman et al., 2007; Kampf et al., 2018; Mayers, et al., 2017; McElveen & Rossow, 2014) has strengthened the connection between the value systems of student affairs and collegiate recreation. Student development remains a critical part of the mission of collegiate recreation departments and student affairs divisions.
NIRSA currently does not appear concerned that its members in aggregate do not have access to the essential knowledge it maintains is critical to do their jobs, even if that knowledge should be aspirational. The tension this creates could lead to practitioners lacking confidence in NIRSA’s credibility as their professional association. In order to maximize the development of students with whom collegiate recreation departments interact with as employees or participants, more examination of practitioners’ educational pathways, the environments they practice in, and mentoring of prospective practitioners should be explored.
Chapter 3

Methods

Methodology and Positionality

My master’s degree field of study was strongly encouraged upon acceptance of a graduate assistantship offer. I completed my graduate degree in sport management at the University of Florida in 2005 before taking my first job at Missouri State University. I have worked at the University of Massachusetts Amherst since 2006. I have been a collegiate recreation professional for the past 17 years. During that time, I have indirectly or directly supervised well over 1000 students. Several of these students went on to become graduate students or professionals in collegiate recreation in different regions of the country. I had been exposed in limited ways to formal student development theories through conferences and other professional development opportunities, but most of the theories of student development I used were informal, tacit theories that I had come to know through experience. My engagement with formal student development theories began in earnest when I started taking classes again in 2013. This engagement led me to confirm, alter, or in some cases reject some of the tacit theories I had come to know. However, I do believe my master’s degree had value in learning facility design, sport law, and risk management. My biased perspective on the value of both a background in sports and the value of a MED-HESA degree could have influenced how I sought to collect data, including the ordering and content of the questions. My perspective may also have influenced how I interpreted and analyzed the data. I took steps to minimize any potential error associated with my positionality, including piloting the instrument, using sound survey design principles, and providing limitations of the methods to follow.
Epistemologically, I consider myself a pragmatist. The methodology should be inferred by the type of question(s) that is being asked (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In this case I attempted to draw generalizations of professionals in collegiate recreation. In addition to demographic questions I sought to answer about collegiate recreation professionals, I also sought to explore the relationship of master’s degree field of study and attitudes of student development theory. Although quantitative approach is therefore very appropriate for this project, a mixed methods explanatory design was used to strengthen the quantitative results.

**Methods Phase 1**

The study was completed in two phases. The first was a 38-item web-based survey that was used to collect data from which the research questions could be addressed, and the findings generalized to the population of interest. In order to fully answer the aforementioned research questions, Chi square tests for independence were run to analyze the strength of the correlation (if any) between the several variables including educational pathway, their identities, and the context they work in using SPSS software. The threshold for statistical significance was set at .05 or lower. The study's second phase was six semi-structured interviews, the protocols for which will be discussed after discussing the methods of first phase.

Fowler (2014) suggested the type of population one is surveying will have an impact on mode selection. In this case, the literacy and technological skills required to be a collegiate recreation professional, made a web-based survey a practical choice for mode selection. For many in higher education, the potential error associated with potentially
low response rates in web-based surveys is not enough to outweigh the benefit of the inexpensive cost of the response mode selection (Laguilles et al., 2011).

**Sample Frame**

The sample frame was the approximately 2,500 professional members of NIRSA, the professional association of collegiate recreation. NIRSA pre-screened the NIRSA membership list to remove anyone who was not to be included in the sample frame. The prescreening process limited the sample frame to those professionals on the list who were working in a collegiate recreation department. The timing of the survey (November) lowered chances of coverage error associated with the list not being up to date because it is outside of the traditional hiring period for the field.

**Sampling Method**

On the surface, it may have seemed wise to complete a census survey of all the NIRSA members because of the low cost of utilizing technology to send a survey to all of them effortlessly. However, as Dillman et al. (2014) wrote, I did not want to “trade small amounts of sampling error for potentially large amounts of nonresponse error” (p.82). For this project, 1250 NIRSA professionals were randomly sampled from the sample frame. I chose 1250 as the number to randomly sample because to have the sample error be +/- 5 with a 95% confidence level, this would have required 333 responses. The projected 26.6% response rate necessary appeared feasible. If instead I had randomly sampled 1000 individuals, the 33.3% response rate necessary to achieve the aforementioned error and level of confidence would have been more difficult to achieve. The technology (eliminating human error) and method of random sampling assisted in attempting to find an accurate representation of the population being studied, collegiate recreation
practitioners (Dillman et al., 2014; Fowler, 2014).

For the project to be endorsed by NIRSA and have NIRSA provide access to their membership list, the following protocols were adopted. After pre-screening the sample frame, NIRSA utilized their database to randomly sample members from the list. NIRSA was provided with an open link to the survey and the introductory and subsequent email reminders. NIRSA was sent timelines of when each email should go out and NIRSA emailed the individuals the survey instrument link. NIRSA did not have access to any of the data captured.

**Survey Administration Plan**

In early September 2017, 12 colleagues in various collegiate recreation roles around the United States piloted the survey. Changes were made to the survey questions after receiving their feedback. Changes were again made after receiving feedback from the NIRSA Research Committee and before preparing the survey for launch. The email invitation was crafted using the principles Dillman et al. (2014) argued are most useful in boosting response rates. The NIRSA sponsorship was an important leverage point for potential respondents because it was an organization to which they belonged (Fowler, 2014) and therefore was highlighted. NIRSA took the email I wrote and formatted it with the look and feel of an email from their headquarters. The email included a NIRSA logo banner at the top and a brief bio of the researcher at the bottom. The highlighting of a favorable survey sponsor has shown to increase response rates (e.g., Fowler, 2014) because it legitimizes the survey request and builds trust (Dillman et al., 2014). The NIRSA logo was hyperlinked in the emails and contact information for the researcher and the faculty advisor was linked if the respondents have any questions and or concerns.
Research supports having a distinctive look and feel for each contact (Dillman et al., 2014) and that increasing the saliency of different attributes may prove to be better leverage points for different individuals (Groves et al., 2000). Therefore, the two email reminders had different subject lines highlighting different attributes of the survey. The subject line of the first invite was “NIRSA Student Development Survey.” The invitation not only further highlighted NIRSA as a sponsoring organization that the respondents are a part of, but also included a topic that is the reason recreation professionals enter the field (Bower et al., 2005). Although there is disagreement on whether shorter invitation length of email invitations will increase response rates (Dillman et al., 2014; Kaplowitz, et al., 2011), the email invitation was purposefully kept short to lessen a burden of response associated with having to read a lengthy email. The link to the survey was located after most of the text in the first invitation. Kaplowitz et al., (2011) found that placing a link at the end of an email boosted their response rates. In the subsequent reminders, the link was moved up to balance the burden of reading the entire email. In addition, the subject matter of the survey aligned well with the interests of those in the sample frame (Bower et al., 2005), and the importance of an attribute of a survey (in this case, the topic of student development theory) to the individuals in the sample added leverage to compel individuals to complete the survey (Groves et al., 2000). However, the lack of a token incentive and mixed mode method of contact may have limited the rate of return (e.g., Dillman et al., 2014; Fowler, 2014).

**Ethical Considerations**

The mode of data collection, in this case, a web-based survey using the Qualtrics online platform, assisted keeping the data secure. The protocols adopted did not allow for
personal email links to be sent. Therefore, the data was never connected to individual
participants and remained anonymous throughout the project. I did not know who was in
the sample and therefore was unaware of how anyone responded to the survey. NIRSA
did not have access to the data set. Although NIRSA did have access to who was in the
sample, they did not know who responded or how they responded.

However, because of the depth of demographic and background questions I asked,
it still may be possible for respondents to be identified if someone already possessed
knowledge of individuals in the field. Although unlikely, this information could impact
respondent's employment because their attitudes of student development may not be
congruent with that of their supervisors or organization where they are currently
employed. However, the findings to follow were only reported in aggregate. The survey
did not contain sensitive questions, but upon reflecting on their own student development,
it is possible that respondents had emotional responses related to past experiences (e.g.,
involving oppression, privilege, or bias related events they had while students). In sum, I
did no more harm than professionals would expect to be exposed to daily. If someone did
have comments, questions, or concerns, the participants did have contact information
available for NIRSA, the faculty sponsor, and the researcher. No one contacted me about
the survey.

Survey Instrument

There were no questions that required substantial amounts of recall (e.g., asking
participants to recall a particular behavior over a particular period). Tourangeau, et al.
(2000) suggested that the questions that require recall can lead to significant
measurement error. The one question that may have required more recall than others
asked participants what formal student development theories they can name (limit of three). However, the preceding question asked how many they can name with the largest option being 3+. The question order made the cognitive process easier for the second question because they were already thinking of the theories they had to name when they came to the open response question.

**Question order.** Tourangeau et al. (2000) argued that factual question processing is impacted by whether the event or experience is distinct and whether the individual has direct knowledge. Therefore, background questions in this survey were upfront because they require less cognitive processing and once the respondents are halfway into the survey, they are less likely to give up if given a question that requires more processing (Dillman et al., 2014). The background questions about the recreation program were grouped next and were followed by questions about their institution. The attitudinal questions were placed last.

**Wording.** I avoided the use of double-barreled questions in order to limit measurement error (e.g., Dillman et al., 2014; Fowler, 2014; Patten, 2016a). Questions with negatives in the question stems were also avoided (Patten, 2016a). No agree/disagree scales were used because they are often misused by researchers, require more cognitive processing, and also often lead to measurement error (Dillman et al., 2014).

**Measures.** Nominal questions were used for factual responses and ordinal questions for attitudinal questions. The ordinal scales were unipolar scales that placed the zero point at the end of the scale. For example, question 29, was phrased, “How useful, if at all, are formal student development theories or concepts in your day-to-day practice?”
The responses went from very useful to not at all useful (zero). There was no middle option to discourage respondents from clicking the middle option throughout the survey and thus creating measurement error. Although Dillman et al. (2014) stated that whether one includes a midpoint tends not to matter, there are those who will select the middle more often because it is a neutral response and easier than committing to one side or the other (Patten, 2016b).

**Data Analysis Phase 1**

The survey was removed from the field on November 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2017, after all 1250 members of the random sample had received two reminders. Thirty-six cases were discarded due to being incomplete. Three hundred twelve completed responses from the random sample were collected and analyzed using SPSS software. The response rate was 25%. Some response categories were removed or combined that were too small to analyze on their own. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the resulting data and inferential statistics assisted in generalizing the results to the population of interest-collegiate recreation professionals (Patten, 2014). Crosstabs were utilized to compare professional and personal characteristics of the practitioners in the study. Chi square tests for independence were used to test for statistical significance between variables. The dependent variables for these tests were knowledge of student development theories (number of theories participants self-reported they could name), usefulness of student development theories or concepts in daily practice, and degree advice practitioners would give to prospective graduate students entering the field of collegiate recreation. The independent variables included institution type, reporting unit, enrollment size, region of
the country, gender identity, graduate assistantship or no graduate assistantship
experience, and master’s degree earned.

Methods Phase 2

In addition to strengthening the overall study, the qualitative, second phase of the
study was conducted to understand how the participants make meaning of the preliminary
survey results (Merriam, 2002). Six 45-minute semi-structured interviews were held in
January 2023 over Zoom. The interviews took place a little over four years since the
close of the survey. Several topics of interest were explored, including how current
contexts after the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic may change how the survey data is
interpreted. Semi-structured interviews have some unstructured and structured general
questions, but the exact wording and order of the questions is not predetermined
(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This method allowed me to collect “specific information” (p.
111) from all participants but provided the flexibility necessary to adapt the unstructured
questions or topics to the flow of the conversation and the views of the participant
(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to select six NIRSA colleagues to participate in the
study (Salmons, 2011). The participants were not meant to be representative of the
quantitative data sample. They were chosen because of their experience as practitioners.
Four were currently working in Region 1 and the other two had experience in Region 1.
All of the participants at the time of the study had been in the field from 12-19 years with
the exception of one. That one individual had been in the field for 4-7 years but was a
director. Most also had the experience of working or going to school in another region of
the country. The participants, who are middle managers and directors, will likely assist in leading the future of the field. Therefore, their perspective on the state of the field was of particular interest. One of the individuals had recently left the field, but I felt their perspective would be insightful as critical critique of collegiate recreation, student affairs, and higher education in general. Most of the participants I knew would likely agree to be interviewed. I stopped after six interviews after reaching a saturation of categories with the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There were no new insights to be gleaned from additional interviews.

The participants were initially contacted via email and then followed up with if necessary. The potential participants were informed the interview would be recorded for transcription purposes with their permission, but the recordings would be discarded at the conclusion of the study. Although some potential identifiable demographic information was noted to describe their individual context, care was taken to generalize the information enough to provide confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used instead of real names. Lastly, member checking was used to review the quotes and themes gleaned from each interview. If they agreed to participate verbally, they were asked to digitally sign the informed consent. Demographic information from each participant was collected electronically. A 45-minute zoom meeting link was sent to each participant along with the informed consent and brief demographic questionnaire. Care was taken to make sure each interview was conducted only after collecting the informed consent and demographic information.

*Interviews*
Data from the first phase of the study was shared with the participants. I asked open-ended questions about the topics of interest and preliminary data with allowance for follow-up or clarifying questions. The interviews had a beginning script that built a rapport and attempted to establish trust (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This script had a few opening questions that serve to get the participant and researcher to get to know one another. During the interviews I took some notes and immediately following the interviews I noted my initial impression gained from each interview. This process allowed for the beginning of data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The ending script thanked the participant for their time and maintained the established rapport necessary to reconnect later to complete the member checking process. The member checking process improves the credibility of the data and increases the trust between the participant and researcher, resulting in richer data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I was mindful of the participants’ time. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Most of the participants were very forthcoming with their responses. A couple of participants less so, but overall useful data resulted from each conversation. Much of what the participants said sounded familiar. A couple of the participants mentioned they believed more conversations like the one we were having, specifically about the changes in the field, would be beneficial. After six interviews, I reached a saturation point of the resulting data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). No new insights or themes were emerging and therefore I no longer needed to interview more individuals.

**Data Analysis Phase 2**

So as not to predetermine themes, I used open codes and subsequently used analytic coding to identify categories and finally themes across all the interviews. For
example, in when taking notes for one interview, I wrote down, “change - traditional model gone.” In addition, after each interview, I reviewed the notes I took and the transcriptions from the interview, edited any mistakes the Zoom transcription software made, and printed the transcriptions out. Through the open coding process, I highlighted particular insights and jotted notes on the transcriptions as well. For example, from a different interview, I highlighted the following:

I’ve got three people running it (a program) who didn’t come up through the pipeline, and it took me about six months to realize why it wasn’t coming together like I hoped it would, and then I realized they didn’t come through the way the rest of us did and they didn’t have that student development or the experience working in the facility that the rest of us [did].

This process allowed me to begin the analysis early and help me immediately compare the data that resulted following the second interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After the first couple of interviews, I created a spreadsheet to assist with grouping the data into the different categories. I continued the process of grouping the data or using analytic codes. For example, looking at the data across the interviews, it was clear that ‘change’ was a category that should continue to be explored. As I continued the interview process, any time changes to the field were mentioned, I included that data in the category in the spreadsheet. Following the last interview and the initial comparative analysis, I “substantiated, revised, and reconfigured” (p. 204) my earlier findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Several themes emerged which I will discuss in chapter 5.

Limitations Phase 2
The gap between the phases can be considered a limitation because the survey data may be different if the study is replicated today because of possible changes in the hiring landscape over the past four years. However, the same empirical evidence about where the field was pre-Covid-19 Pandemic would not exist. Because there is a human element in deciding what data to include and exclude from the findings, there is a possibility that biases not obvious to the researcher may have influenced the conclusions resulting from the second phase of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The method of qualitative data collection is not meant to be generalized to the population of interest. However, the interview data can provide a lens through which to interpret the results of the first phase of the study.
Chapter 4
Demographic Profile of NIRSA Members

A total of 348 individuals responded to the survey and 312 complete responses were collected from a random sample of 1250. The completed response rate was 25%. By comparing the demographic characteristics, in this case the 2500 NIRSA members who were active practitioners in a collegiate recreation department, to the sample, I could tell whether the sample was representative of the population. In addition, I included a comparison of demographic data of ACPA and NASPA members. Table 1 breaks down the differences in the sample and the population regionally and by practitioner title. In addition, Table 1 compares the gender and racial/ethnic identity data of the sample to NIRSA member data and ACPA & NASPA member data.

Race/Ethnicity

A total of 274 participants responded to the race/ethnicity question. Individuals responded being black (n=23), 8% of the time. The Latino/a/x community was represented by eight participants, totaling 2.9% of the sample. There was one participant from the Indian Subcontinent, one participant identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and one participant reported they identified as an Asian. White was recorded by 88% (n=240) of the sample.

Gender Identity

There were 117 participants or 43% who identified as a woman. Out of 272 responses, 153 or 56% of participants indicated they identified as a man. There was one participant identified as gender non-conforming and one identified as genderqueer.

NIRSA and ACPA/NASPA Member Data

Race/Ethnicity Comparison Data
NIRSA has limited demographic information from in their membership database from user input in membership profiles and salary census surveys. They are missing 26% of the race/ethnicity of the membership and 24% of gender identity. Having said that, of the data they do have, 77% is white, 10% African American, 5% Hispanic, 5% Multi-racial, and 2% Asian (NIRSA HQ, personal communication, February 8, 2023).

The biggest difference between the NIRSA race/ethnicity database information and the collected sample is in the reported number of identified white individuals (+10%). The NIRSA database is strikingly similar to the ACPA and NASPA data that Miles (2013) collected. The percentage of participants who identified as Black in their study was 9%. The reported Latino/a/x responses collected made up 5% of their sample and 9% was the makeup of the “other” category. In contrast to my sample, Miles (2013) found only 77% of their sample identified as white. The disparity could be because my random sample was not big enough to accurately reflect all the different racial and ethnic data in the population of interest.

**Gender Identity Comparison Data**

On the other hand, the gender identity figures collected in the sample are remarkably similar to the NIRSA database figures; 56% to 58% identified as a man, respectively. However, those numbers differed significantly from the NASPA and ACPA figures. Instead, 66% of NASPA and ACPA members identified as women (Miles, 2013). The history of collegiate recreation may be creating an echo of sorts in the higher percentage of identified men working in the field. As the field began with intramural sports and these offerings were mostly for men only until the second half of the 20th century (E.g., Dudenhoeffer, 1997; Horowitz, 1987; Stewart, 1992), many of the first
practitioner jobs in the field were filled by men. As time went on, the field has hired more women into all positions within collegiate recreation, including intramural ones, but the exclusive history still may be playing a part in how accessible certain jobs are for members of all gender identities.

**Professional Title Representation**

While the sample and population are not identical, the differences between the two do fall between the approximate relative margin of error for the sample at +/- 6 percentage points for most categories. The lone exception to this in the practitioner title category is the number of respondents that identified themselves as a coordinator. Coordinators in the sample were underrepresented by 10.1%. However, because titles of entry level professionals do vary from institution to institution, there are many assistant directors that are also entry level practitioners.

**Regional Representation**

Similarly, there are two differences of regional representation worth noting. Region 1 was over-represented by 8.6%. I have worked in Region 1 for 11+ years (at the time of the survey launch) and the familiarity with some colleagues may have inadvertently led to more Region 1 members of NIRSA completing the survey. The survey was launched days before I presented twice at the NIRSA Region 1 conference. My presence at the conference may have also led to an uptick in responses from those at the conference in the region. For the purposes of answering my research questions, the larger Region 1 response may have been fortuitous because of the larger population of private institutions.
As Table 2 shows, Region 1 had more individuals (n=31) from private institutions respond than four out of the five other regions combined (n=23). Without the high response rate in Region 1, the low response rate from individuals working at private institutions in the other regions may have made the results less insightful. Region Canada is small in comparison to the other NIRSA regions. Eliminating this response category from the analysis does not make the results any less impactful for the study of NIRSA members in the United States, but researchers in the future may want to oversample this subpopulation to get usable data. In the next section I explain why some additional responses to survey items were combined or eliminated.

**Response Categories**

To narrow the focus to the research questions, certain items that follow were either combined or eliminated if the responses were too small or not germane to help to answer the research questions. Collegiate recreation department reporting unit responses were recategorized as either Student Affairs/Student Life or Other. Athletics was clearly the second most popular reporting unit response, but my research interest does not lie in the difference between those that report to athletics (n=36), auxiliary services (n=11), and physical education (n=3), but in the difference between student affairs/student life and all others.

Practitioner titles responses were recategorized as Coordinator, Assistant Director/Senior Assistant Director, Associate Director/Senior Associate Director, Director, and Other. Some of the practitioner title response rates were small, and as noted earlier, because of the varying levels of titles and their meanings at different institutions, this reorganization of responses made the most sense. The responses for degree advice for
prospective graduate students entering the professional field of collegiate recreation were recategorized as Sports/Recreation Management, Student Affairs/Student Personnel/Higher Education, and depends on their initial area of specialization. Kinesiology/Exercise Science and Leisure Studies were only advised two times each. Public Health/Health Promotion was only advised once. These categories were thereby eliminated from the analysis.

Sports and Recreation Management were combined because the research interest is between traditional collegiate recreation educational pathways, of which both degrees fit, and traditional student affairs educational pathways. The Other responses (n=20) did not yield tremendously usable data. The subcategories within are too many to use in aggregate. For example, I could create a category for advice to get an MBA, but only two participants advised for that degree, and I already removed other categories because of the low response. Institution Type categories were recategorized into four-year public and four-year private institutions since there were only three two-year institutions recorded. To see all the original survey items and response categories, see Appendix A.

**Missing Data**

Although the sample appears representative of the population, 36 of the total responses (n=348) were incomplete. Osborne (2013) advocated for including incomplete data in the data analysis because the data are usable responses and the likelihood for significant measurement error is low. While this advice sounds enticing, participants were not given a unique link to the survey. Thus, the method of delivering the open electronic link to survey participants means that the 36 incomplete responses may have come from participants that started but did not finish the survey. It is very possible
several of these same individuals later came back and started a new survey once prompted by one of the two email reminders. If instead the participants were given a unique link to the survey and were unable to duplicate responses, I would be much more likely to include the incomplete data in the survey.

Some respondents were screened out of the survey after a few demographic questions by selecting bachelor’s degree as their highest degree earned (n=35). There were a few individuals that were screened out of the survey for not being current practitioner (full-time employee) or not accepting the terms of the online consent form. In addition, by combining or eliminating some of the response categories, this cut down on some of the survey responses utilized. Therefore, the number of cases (n) in the incomplete data set (with the missing responses) for question 38 (if a student is planning on a career in collegiate recreation, which master’s degree would be the best choice?) is 269, and for the complete data set (removed missing responses) is 248. The sample error in the incomplete data set for this survey item is 5.66 and is 5.91 for the complete data set. The similarity in sample errors does not necessarily favor one data set over the other. Although the incomplete data set has a slightly smaller sampling error, the increased likelihood for measurement error related to multiple responses from the same participant makes the difference in sample error less important. If the sampling errors were more apart, then a tougher decision would have loomed. Table 3 shows the breakdown in difference of frequency of response for several of the variables in question. Less than 23 responses for any one item in Table 3 separate the two data sets.
Although, as shown with the slight differences in frequencies of response as indicated in Table 3, the complete data set is unlikely to yield vastly different results than if the incomplete data set was used.

**Regional Demographics**

Region 1 led the way with 73 responses followed by Region 2 with 71 responses. Region 3 (n=39), Region 6 (n=35), Region 4 (n=30) and Region 5 (n=20) followed in that order.

**Reporting Unit**

Individuals indicated their institutions reporting to student affairs 78% of the time. This number is consistent with previous research indicating approximately 75% of institutions reporting to student affairs (Stier et al., 2010) In Region 1, 63% of schools reported to student affairs and that reflected the lowest number nationally. Whereas in Region 3, 90% of institutions report to student affairs.

**Institution Type**

Overall, there were 227 individuals from four-year public institutions and 79 from four-year private institutions. Therefore, four-year public institutions made up 74% of the respondents. This is contrasted with NASPA and ACPA members reporting they are from public institutions 59% of the time. The disparity may be due to the number of full-time collegiate recreation positions at private schools not being as substantial when compared with other student affairs offices. As shown in Table 4, when institution type and reporting unit were cross tabbed, only 48% of private schools report to student affairs, while 88% of public schools report to student affairs.

**Enrollment**
Table 5 shows an even distribution of school enrollment responses from the survey. The highest response category was schools with 1-5000 students enrolled (n=39). The lowest number of responses was represented by individuals with school enrollments between 35,001-40,000 students (n=18). The highest number of schools with 5000 or less student enrollment was also found in Region 1 (n=18). This finding makes sense since it is also a hotbed for private institutions. Region 3 had by far the most individuals from schools with 40,000+ student enrollment (n=11) and out of the schools from Region 3, 73% of them had enrollments of 20,000 or more. When the reporting unit was cross tabbed with enrollment, schools between 1-20,000 reported to student affairs 70% of the time, while schools with enrollments more than 20,000 reported to student affairs 86% of the time.

**Personal Characteristics**

**Title**

Professional titles were evenly distributed. Coordinators/senior coordinators responded 61 times, assistant directors/senior assistant directors 89 times, associate/senior associate directors 68 times, and directors 87 times. Each of the titles ranged from 20-29% of the total responses.

**Longevity in the field**

The longevity in the field was spread fairly evenly amongst study participants. The highest percentage of responses was those that have been in the field 20 years or more at 25% (n=67). Those that spent 0-3 years made up 18% of responses (n=50), participants with 4-7 years made up 19% of responses (n=52), and 8-11 years of experience made up 19% of responses (n=51). The smallest percentage of responses
came in the next two categories, 12-15 (n=33, 12%) and 16-19 years of experience (n=20, 7%).

**Educational Level**

As shown in Table 6, 35 individuals reported their highest earned degree to be a bachelor’s degree. Thirty-four percent of these individuals worked at private institutions. Those that reported master’s degrees being their highest degree earned made up the biggest category with 259. Individuals with doctorate degrees were represented by 14 individuals. If one only uses the 259 who indicated their master’s was their highest degree earned and does not include those with doctorate degrees (as having master’s degrees), 84% of practitioners that responded had their master’s degree. If one includes the doctorate degrees in that category, the percentage of individuals with master’s degrees in this study jumps to 89%. By contrast up to 93% of NASPA and ACPA members have earned master’s degrees (Miles, 2013). While not statistically significant, the difference between student affairs practitioners generally and collegiate recreation practitioners may reflect that while collegiate recreation is a unit of student affairs, it is a much younger unit, having largely migrated to student affairs in the 1990’s (Milton, 2008).

**Master’s Degree Field of Study**

Only 9% of respondents (n=20) reported their master’s degree field of study was a student affairs, student personnel, or higher education (MED-HESA) degree. Over 56% of respondents indicated they had earned leisure studies, recreation management, or sport management degrees (n=127). In another study, NASPA members reported having MED-HESA degrees 88% of the time (Miles, 2013). Similar to the overall number of master’s
degrees, the disparity in the number of MED-HESA degrees between collegiate recreation practitioners and NASPA and ACPA members may reflect older reporting structures in collegiate recreation (Milton, 2008). Those old structures may still influence how prospective practitioners and mentors of these individuals value the degree fields that appear more aligned with their specific duties in their collegiate recreation role. In other words, the professionalization of collegiate recreation may be lagging behind the professionalization of other student affairs subfields because the essential knowledge to do the work has not been agreed upon by the membership of the field (e.g., McGill et al., 2021; Wilensky, 1964).

**Graduate Assistantship or Graduate Internship**

Of those responding to the question, “Did you have a graduate assistantship in collegiate recreation or a graduate internship in collegiate recreation,” 70% reported that they had had such an experience. The participants indicated they prioritized the graduate assistantship work experience over the graduate school during their search process at a rate of 77%. Participants indicated that they applied to collegiate recreation department before applying to the graduate school 56% of the time. An additional 22% indicated they applied to the collegiate recreation department and the graduate school at the same time. Therefore, 78% applied to the collegiate recreation program first or at the same time as application was submitted for the graduate school. These results may suggest collegiate recreation practitioners embark on an atypical pathway into graduate studies compared to those working in other student affairs departments. A more typical pathway for student affairs practitioners may include applying and being accepted into a graduate program and then looking for ways to fund such a degree. In addition, since most collegiate
recreation practitioners are prioritizing the graduate assistantship experience first, the departments are acting as gatekeepers into the profession, often funneling prospective students into degree programs they list in the job advertisement. The lack of MED-HESA degrees suggests much of the listings may not include these degrees.

**Overall Regional Differences**

As shown in Table 3, forty-three percent (n=31) of Region 1 participants worked for four-year private institutions compared to 18% of participants from Regions 2-6 ($\chi^2 = 16.7, p = <.001$). Region 1 participants were also less likely to report to student affairs (66%, n=46) compared to other regions (83%, n=165, $\chi^2 = 11.6, p = <.001$). The next highest number was Region 2 with 13, but the second highest percentage of schools from any one region was Region 3 with 28% (n=11). After screening out those with the highest degree being a bachelor’s degree, the participants’ region and whether they had experienced a graduate assistantship or graduate internship was cross tabbed. In other words, the following data referenced only reflects those participants with a master’s degree or higher. Only 59% of Region 1 participants (n=37), and by far the lowest of any region, indicated they had had a graduate assistantship or graduate internship compared to 75% (n=122) of all other regions combined ($\chi^2 = 7.0, p = .031$). By contrast, 84% of participants (n=48) in Region 2 indicated they had experienced a graduate assistantship or graduate internship.

In sum, while a small difference in the number of master’s degrees earned between ACPA/NASPA members (93%) (Miles, 2013) and NIRSA members (89%) may reflect the lagging professionalization of collegiate recreation as a subfield of student affairs, there seem to be several factors indicating possible regional differences of
professionalization within collegiate recreation, specifically with Region 1 compared to its counterparts. Among those with master’s degrees in Region 1, fewer of them have had a graduate assistantship or graduate internship experience. The lack of standard paraprofessional training compared to other regions may also be linked to several environmental factors. These factors include the larger number of private schools, more institutions with smaller enrollments, and the lower rate of institutions reporting to student affairs. Standardized training is a part of the professionalization process (e.g., Arminio, 2011; Wilensky, 1964) and if Region 1 is an outlier in this area, it may signal that as a region, it may be less professionalized than others. However, exploring whether the lack of experiential training and different institutional contexts are linked to essential knowledge can also illustrate whether Region 1 is less professionalized than its counterparts. Therefore, knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory, in addition to degree advice mentors would give prospective graduate students will be explored in Chapter 5.

Additional Personal Characteristics

Career Goal

When asking participants what their ultimate career goal is, most indicated they either wanted to become a director of a collegiate recreation department (n=100, 36% of responses) or stay in their current position (n=79, 28% of responses). The next highest response was of those that wished to advance beyond a collegiate recreation director to a senior student affairs officer (SSAO) (n=38). Directors responded wanting to either stay in their current role or move to a similar role at a large institution 59 times. An additional 11 directors wanted to advance beyond their current role to become an SSAO. In
addition, less than 2% of total individuals across all titles wanted to work in a different student affairs office. Coordinators wanted to do this more than any other category (n=6). The lack of individuals wanting to do so adds credibility to the notion that collegiate recreation practitioners do not transition to other student affairs roles as often as other subfields of student affairs do, but if it happens, it appears to be early in their career. See Tables 7 and 8 for more information.

**Gender and Specialization**

I asked participants, “what area of specialization did your job primarily entail when you first started your professional career in collegiate recreation?” There were six job categories that had 20 or more responses. Women and men selected aquatics equally at 10 each. Sport Clubs was selected by men 10 times and women 11 times. The “other” category was selected 13 times by men and nine times by women. There were several combined jobs listed in the other category such as intramural and clubs, intramurals and outdoor adventure, but there was not a particular job that showed up multiple times that would have changed the data in the other response categories significantly. The difference between women and men was apparent however for the three remaining job categories. Women were more likely to have fitness positions than men. Of all those that responded that fitness was the primary area of specialization when they first began a career in collegiate recreation, 66% of them were women. Men were much more likely to have intramural positions and facility positions starting out, as 68% of those indicating their first job was related to intramurals were men and 71% of those indicating their first job was related to facility management were men.

**Sexual Orientation**
Heterosexual/Straight was selected on the survey 94% (n=257) of the time. Participants identified as lesbian 4% (n=10) of the time. Bisexual and Queer categories only recorded two responses each. One individual identified as Gay.

**Limitations Phase 1**

**Non-Response Error**

One limitation of the first phase of the study is the mode of data collection. Web survey responses are falling and the data that results are often less than ideal (e.g., Couper, 2013; Dillman et al., 2014; Fowler, 2014). Although the analytic sample for this study provided insights into the educational pathways of collegiate recreation professionals, the non-response error possibly introduced should be noted. Dillman et al., (2014) suggested using a mixed mode method of contact, multiple modes of response, and token incentives to improve response rates. Trust can be built through using a pre-notice letter and a token incentive to show appreciation of consideration without requiring reciprocity. This trust has been shown to boost response rates (Dillman et al., 2014). Unfortunately, due to NIRSA research protocols, a pre-notice letter was not used in this study. It was not known who was selected as part of the random sample, so personalized letters could not be sent. A token incentive was not included because of the adopted protocols, but also because of cost considerations. Although having another mode of response, such as a paper survey sent via snail mail may have nominally improved response rates, the adopted protocols would not allow for this either.

**Measurement Error**

Surveys are known to have measurement errors for many of the same reasons described in earlier sections. The reminder emails were not targeted to non-respondents,
but instead every person in the random sample received them regardless of if they had started or completed the survey. The lack of targeted reminders may have resulted in some individuals starting the survey, receiving a reminder, and starting over again. The measurement error that resulted could only have been avoided if participants were sent individualized links to the survey that would have allowed them to save their progress. Although work was done to minimize measurement error, there was still measurement error associated with the survey based on how participants interpreted the attitudinal questions and the level of accuracy with which they responded to descriptive questions. The survey topic was not a mystery, and the responses may have reflected social desirability or cognitive-based order effects. The respondents knew the survey was about student development theory and that their self-reported knowledge was being assessed. Therefore, it is possible that their answers were inflated to meet that perceived social norm. Cognitive-based question order effects may have taken place when participants responded to subsequent questions of student development theory (Dillman et al., 2014).

**Skip Logic Error**

Responses from 225 collegiate recreation professionals were collected regarding their graduate education. A skip logic error in the survey design resulted in participants inadvertently being redirected in the survey and the loss of 47 responses about the participants’ graduate education, but the logic error was rectified early in the data collection process. The error occurred when participants indicated that they were, “not at all likely,” to obtain a doctorate degree. While 114 individuals selected this response, the master’s degree data was collected on 66 of them. However, the data of the master’s degrees of those who clicked that response we do have (after the error was corrected) is
remarkably similar to the overall data of master’s degrees that was collected. Of the participants who clicked they are “not at all likely,” to obtain a doctoral degree, 8% of them had previously acquired a MED-HESA degree compared to the 9% of all participants in the analytic sample, a difference of 1%. Although the sample cannot be claimed as representative, there is no reason to believe that the responses lost impacted the data significantly. If anything, the number of acquired MED-HESA degrees may be overestimated in the resulting data. The practical significance of the findings and implications using this analytic sample are discussed in Chapter 6.
Chapter 5

Knowledge and Perceived Usefulness of Student Development Theory

Frequencies of the dependent variables including knowledge of student development theories, perceived usefulness of student development theories, and advice to prospective graduate students entering the field were analyzed, followed by chi square tests for independence between the aforementioned dependent variables and several independent variables including NIRSA region, degree earned, graduate assistantship or no graduate assistantship, institution type, reporting unit, enrollment, longevity in the field, gender identity, and initial area of specialization in the field. There was statistical significance between the following variables. Degree earned, institution type, reporting unit, and enrollment each had a significant relationship to the number of theories participants could name. Degree earned and institution type each had a significant relationship to the degree advice practitioners would give to prospective graduate students. None of the aforementioned independent variables had a significant relationship to the perceived usefulness of student development theory. The frequencies of the dependent variables and the results of the chi square tests for independence will be discussed in more detail throughout this chapter.

There were 225 participants who identified their master’s degree field of study. Only 9% (n=20) indicated they had acquired a MED-HESA degree. In attempting to understand whether there was a relationship with MED-HESA degrees and knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory, responses were recoded to MED-HESA and non-MED-HESA degrees.

Knowledge of Student Development Theory
Overall, more than half of all practitioners can name one or no formal student development theories. Only 23% can name three or more formal student development theories. There are personal and professional characteristics that appear related to the number of formal student development theories practitioners state they can name.

**Degree Earned and Knowledge of Student Development Theory**

Eighty percent (n=16) of the collegiate recreation practitioners in the study with a MED-HESA degree reported knowledge of two or more formal student development theories in contrast to 43% (n=86) of practitioners with a non-MED-HESA degree ($\chi^2 = 10.3, p = .001$).

**Institution Type and Knowledge of Student Development Theory**

There was a difference in the number of student development theories those from public institutions and those from private institutions could name. Fifty percent (n=99) of practitioners from four-year public institutions reported knowledge of two or more student development theories. By comparison 34% (n=23) of practitioners from four-year private institutions could do the same ($\chi^2 = 4.7, p = .031$). Another way to state this is that two-thirds (n=44) of practitioners from four-year private schools could name one or no formal student development theories while 51% (n=101) of practitioners from four-year public schools can name one or no formal student development theories.

**Reporting Unit and Knowledge of Student Development Theory**

Similarly, two-thirds (66%, n=41) of practitioners reporting to non-student affairs units could only name one or no formal student development theories compared to 51% (n=106) of those reporting to student affairs units ($\chi^2 = 4.4, p = .035$). Forty-nine percent (n=102) of practitioners reporting to student affairs reported being able to name two or
more formal student development theories while 34% (n=21) of those reporting to non-student affairs units indicated being able to do the same.

**Enrollment and Knowledge of Student Development Theory**

Fifty-three percent (n=70) of practitioners working at a school enrollment of 20,001 or more self-reported they could name two or more student development theories compared to 38% (n=53) of to those who worked at a school of 20,000 or fewer ($\chi^2 = 6.4, p = .012$). Sixty-two percent (n=86) of practitioners who worked at a school of 20,000 or few students indicated knowledge of one or no formal student development theories compared to 47% (n=61) of practitioners who worked at a school of 20,001 or more.

**Perceived Usefulness of Student Development Theory**

When participants were asked “How useful, if at all, are formal student development theories or concepts in your day-to-day practice,” 11% indicated they were very useful. Somewhat useful was selected 34% of the time, slightly useful 37%, not at all useful was selected 8% of the time, and “I am not familiar enough with formal student development theories,” was selected 11% of the time. There were no statistically significant relationships between any of the independent variables and the perceived usefulness of student development theory.

**Degree Advice**

There were 273 participants that responded to the question, “If a student is planning on a career in collegiate recreation, which master’s degree would be the best choice (assuming they have a choice)”. The highest indicated response was recreation/sports management with 34% (n=93). Depends on the initial area of
specialization was the next highest response with 30% (n=82). MED-HESA degrees were selected 27% of the time (n=73), a significant increase over the 9% of participants (n=20) who indicated having such a degree. However, as interest is in whether there is a difference in the degree advice amongst those with MED-HESA and non-MED-HESA degrees, specific the degree responses for this question were recoded into Non-MED-HESA and MED-HESA prior to cross tabbing this question with personal and professional characteristics. By doing so, those advocating for non-MED-HESA degrees jumped to 43% (n=118) out of 273 total responses.

**Earned Degree and Advice**

When the degree earned and degree advice were finally cross tabbed, there were 224 valid responses. If non-MED-HESA degree holders valued their degree, one would expect them to be advising others to follow in their path. Instead, only 44% (n= 89) of non-MED-HESA degree holders suggested prospective graduate students should major in a specific non-MED-HESA degree. This figure does not even consider those who earned one non-MED-HESA degree and advised prospective graduate students to get a different non-MED-HESA degree. By contrast, only 10% (n=2) of MED-HESA degree holders suggested prospective graduate students should earn a non-MED-HESA degree ($\chi^2 = 10.8, p = .004$). MED-HESA degree holders (n=11) suggest individuals earn a MED-HESA degree 55% of the time. There were (n=52) 26% of non-MED-HESA degree holders who suggested prospective graduate students should earn a MED-HESA degree. Another way of looking at this is there were 204 non-MED-HESA degree holders (when cross tabbing with degree advice) and only 91 total participants would advise getting such a degree, a 224% decrease. On the other hand, there were only 20 participants with
MED-HESA degrees, but 63 total participants would advise getting a MED-HESA degree, a 315% increase. The data indicates that MED-HESA degree holders value their degrees more so than their non-MED-HESA degree counterparts. Both some non-MED-HESA and MED-HESA degree holders felt there is value in earning a degree in one’s initial area of specialization within collegiate recreation, 31% (n= 63) and 35% (n=7) of responses, respectively.

**Institution Type and Advice**

Practitioners from four-year private institutions (n=41) would advise prospective graduate students to get a non-MED-HESA degree 61% of the time versus only (n=76) 37% for those working at four-year public institutions ($\chi^2 = 12.4$, $p = .002$). Only 15% of those working at private institutions (n=10) would advise a prospective graduate to earn a MED-HESA degree compared to (n=63) 31% of those working in public institutions. Lastly, those from private institutions would advise a degree in the specialization area of the prospective graduate student (n=16) 24% of the time, but those from public institutions would advise a degree in the specialization (n=64) 32% of the time.

**Difference of Understanding of Student Development**

An overwhelming 77% of participants responded, “yes,” when asked, “Do you perceive a difference of what student development is amongst your colleagues”. Eighty-six percent (n=94) of participants who worked at schools with an enrollment of 20,001 or more, believed there was a difference in understanding of student development theory, but only 67% (n=66) of those from schools with 20,000 or fewer students believed the same ($\chi^2 = 9.6$, $p = .002$).

**Why the Difference of Understanding?**
Overall, the participants who answered, “yes,” were then asked, “what do you believe is the biggest reason for these differences in the understanding of student development. The response, “difference in degree fields of study,” had the highest response rate with 30% of participants recording this. The next highest response was “difference in the quality of mentors,” at 16%, followed by difference in work environment at 15%.

Where Did Practitioners Learn the Most

When asked, “Where did you learn the most useful knowledge about working with students, participants were given the options of, “graduate school classes,” “graduate work experience (e.g., graduate assistantship or internship),” “Professional work experience,” or “other.” Only two percent (n=6) of the 273 participants choose, “graduate school classes.” “Graduate work experience,” was selected (n=63) 23% of the time, “professional work experience,” was selected (n=199) 73% of the time, and (n=5) 2% of individuals also indicated, “other.” There were no significant relationships between the personal characteristics or environments that practitioners work in and where they learned the most about working with students.

Interviews

Participants

In April of 2023 I conducted six 45-minute semi-structured interviews. I stopped after six interviews after reaching a saturation of the resulting data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Five individuals were current NIRSA practitioners, and one was a former NIRSA practitioner. I used pseudonyms for each practitioner in addition to talking about their personal characteristics in aggregate to protect their identities. There were three women
and three men overall. Of the six, one identified as Black, and another identified as
Asian. All others identified as Caucasian. There was one individual who did not have a
traditional graduate assistantship pathway into the field, but the other five individuals did
have graduate assistantships. There were two individuals who held doctorates while the
other four held master’s degrees. Of the current practitioners, four were working at
schools located in Region 1. There was a total of three who were working at private
institutions and four of the five current practitioners worked in departments reporting to
student affairs. One practitioner each worked at school enrollments of 1-5000, 5001-
10,000, 20,001-25,000, 25,001-30,000, and 35,001-40,000 respectively. The longevity of
the individuals varied from one person having 4-7 years of professional experience, two
having 12-15 years of experience, and three having 16-19 years of experience. Aquatics
was the specialty that two of the individuals started in while the rest of the participants
started in intramural sports. There were two associate directors and three directors
amongst the current practitioners. As described in chapter 3, these individuals were not
chosen to be representative of the quantitative sample, but because of their valuable
insights as experienced middle managers and directors, all of whom will likely play a part
deciding future directions of the field.

Themes

The following themes emerged from the data:

1) The aspirational nature of the NIRSA core competency about student
development theory

2) The struggle for professionalization or legitimacy within student affairs and
higher educational institutions generally
3) The value of the graduate assistantship experience

4) The essential knowledge required to do the work

5) The current hiring climate affecting higher education and collegiate recreation specifically.

Aspirational Competency. Not one of the participants felt the student development theory competency reflected the reality of collegiate recreation practitioners. Peter reflected, “I think you could ask every person that attended the annual conference this year and you’d get less than 100 people who could articulate theories and models that describe the development of college students (1700 attended).” Sue noted, “…doing my doctorate I did a ton of theory work, but I know very few people who could even define or describe one theory or model of student development or leadership or anything like that.” Lucas mentioned there is a current reliance in many departments on experts in theory and assessment rather than theory and assessment work being embedded in all that practitioners do. Amelia spoke to the informal knowledge practitioners ultimately rely on when she said the following:

If you could take out “articulate theories and models that describe,” I think a lot of our colleagues, as you start it [reading the competency language] through, “hands on experiential learning,” can describe the development of college students. Can they use language around theories and models? No, but I do think a lot of the experiential learning lends itself well to understanding the development when you’re in the field for 5-10 years.

Similarly, Ken argued the following:
It’s more on the job and passive learning and not many professionals have gone through the theoretical study, and they’re just kind of ... not winging it, but for lack of a better term, learning on the job and there’s less intentionality with what we are doing as a profession as a whole.

**Struggle for Legitimacy.** Participants highlighted that as a profession, collegiate recreation is attempting to keep up with student affairs and/or the rest of higher education. Lucas shared the following:

I think the thing I get frustrated with is... is our reputation impacted because we don’t do the right theory, models, and assessment? How do we validate our work, our great work? Because people in a faculty [positions] and academic affairs, they are research based whereas we are more practitioner based.

Sue believes NIRSA may be signaling to others our importance when she said the following:

...Within student affairs like trying to prove that we’re just as important and just as good as everybody else in student affairs, that I think this kind of comes up like, “no no no, theory is important to us too,” even though I don’t think that people in student affairs use it all that regularly either. But I think there is this idea of like we want to make sure that we seem academic since we’re an academic institution.”

Peter noted, “We don’t see a lot of campus rec folks go and be vice president of student affairs.”

**Student Development Theory.** At the same time there may be real value to understanding student development theory on a practitioner level as Amelia said:
I want to be the best professional I can be for the students who I care so deeply about but who come to me with complex issues or who I don’t understand why one student is struggling and another is thriving. And these students who have vastly different backgrounds than I do, whether it be racial backgrounds or educational backgrounds and you know that is what led me down the path to get my advanced [degree], because I was looking for those answers, and they didn’t exist unless I was going to go back into the classroom.

Amelia also noted, “I see colleagues making sweeping generalizations about students that are scratching the surface of what’s really going on.” She also felt there was value to understanding theory so as to be seen as a peer in the division of student affairs and getting a seat at the table, which had not happened with previous colleagues in her department prior to her obtaining her doctorate. However, Sue had a different perspective as she explained in the following way:

…I feel like a lot of people don’t think about that day to day or even often and I find like it can be useful for big picture thinking... I don’t even know that it’s needed for a lot of positions, except when they start to get more into the big picture stuff. I guess understanding students in their development is helpful.

She went on to explain that she knows of theory experts who are known for their theory knowledge and teaching of theory, but they still do not use it in their day-to-day practice.

**Graduate Assistantship Knowledge.** Some of the participants spoke of benefits that came from the graduate assistantship experience. Amelia mentioned that in general she has noticed a lack of maturity from those practitioners coming straight from their
undergraduate school into their first full-time practitioner role. She’s also noticed a difference in the commitment to the field and a general lack of critical thinking skills. Lucas stated that moving away from home, more time to mature, the benefit of being part of a supportive cohort, and more comprehensive on-boarding and training processes fostered growth in graduate assistants. Kate agreed by saying the following:

I think it was kind of always a joke in our generation that you didn’t really need a master’s degree, you needed a two-year GA (graduate assistant) position to know what you were doing. And without that I think it’s hard, because while we all work our tails off during those two years, what you gain from that is irreplaceable.

Sue did not have a graduate assistantship in collegiate recreation. She was skeptical of the necessity of that experience having seen first-hand what undergraduates could do with the proper training and how that could be applied to entry level practitioners without a graduate assistantship. Whether or not the graduate assistantship is a valuable experience for prospective entry level practitioners, the current hiring climate may be forcing practitioners to adopt new strategies. Sue continued, “The question is not what to do if GAs go away, we need to step back further and ask what purpose do the GA positions serve and can we meet that purpose some other way?”

**Current Hiring Climate.** Lucas reflected on the following about the lack of graduate assistantships available and how the shifting hiring landscape is forcing practitioners to rethink their hiring priorities for entering practitioners:

We’re not doing rocket science or heart surgery. You can learn the skills that are needed... anybody could probably learn building manager responsibilities, risk management, operation[s]. ...If master’s degrees are not becoming the norm for
getting [a] first year job in collegiate rec, what does that mean for the foundations of student development theories? Because if they are not in a recreation, student life, student affairs undergrad degree, they’re definitely not going to be getting it because our culture is not, we’re not going to be going over student development theory when I’m training a coordinator.

Further, participants mentioned how recruitment and onboarding have changed in the current hiring context. Peter spoke of prospective graduate students increasingly getting degrees that have more overall utility outside of collegiate rec/high education and that he is forced to recruit prospective practitioners without master's degrees to stay competitive. Kate explained the following about the hiring context while also pointing at the utility of a graduate assistantship:

I’ve got three people running it (a program) who didn’t come up through the pipeline, and it took me about six months to realize why it wasn’t coming together like I hoped it would, and then I realized they didn’t come through the way the rest of us did and they didn’t have that student development or the experience working in the facility that the rest of us [did].

Similarly, Ken said, “We have [a] position open right now, and we have not had an ideal candidate apply yet out of 30 applicants. None of them are what we would consider ideally.” I asked him, “Do you think our industry is going to change?” He responded, “We’re going to have to. The old model is almost non-existent. We’re going to have to broaden our criteria, our expectations.” Sue agreed when she said the following:
The times are changing, and I think it’s only the schools that get on board, and the profession itself, like needs to get on board with the things are changing. And people are expecting to be treated differently now and I think this new generation’s coming up... it’s just not going to work in the field if it doesn’t change. It’s just going to get harder and harder to find people willing to do that work in collegiate recreation without better work life balance/harmony and better compensation).

**Possible Solutions.** Several participants suggested ways in which the field should adapt to the current hiring climate. Their possible solutions included having dedicated student development professionals, more online learning modules to assist with more comprehensive and supportive on-boarding in a psychologically and physically safe environment, a NIRSA school for early-career practitioners to replace the graduate assistantship experience, more NIRSA resources available, a renewed focus by NIRSA to growing the association to alleviate hiring challenges, academic partnerships with MED-HESA degree programs that could create student development theory classes for staff, and the encouraging of networking outside of the practitioner’s institution. Regarding networking, Ken said the following:

Yeah, there’s got to be a shift in... I don’t know what it is because I’m not coming from outside the field. I don’t know what those young professionals are looking for. But there’s not a way for them to connect to other people and that’s not what the association (NIRSA) is, the people. It’s not the learning, it’s not the surveys, not the research, it’s the people. So, if you’re not connecting to the people, then what’s really the point?
Ken’s statement highlighted the value of connection between colleagues at different institutions and the amount of learning that can result. He is implying the value is greater than the actual sessions or trainings that people attend at conferences and workshops.

**Summary of Interviews**

In summation, the participants all believed the NIRSA core competency on student development theory was aspirational. The competency may have been put in place to signal to student affairs and academic affairs that collegiate recreation matters. The struggle for legitimacy is felt at the department level. The lack of work grounded in theory has the potential to threaten the legitimacy of the field when compared to other student affairs offices. While some practitioners do not think student development theory is necessary to do the job at the most basic level, there are those that value the knowledge and its impact on their practice and the access it grants them at the divisional level. Participants noted the need for a course correction in hiring, on-boarding, and expectations of entry level practitioners in higher education, student affairs, and collegiate recreation to adapt to the current hiring context.
Chapter 6

Discussion and Implications

Wilensky (1964) argued that many fields were fighting to become a profession and while there are identified benefits to professionalization including higher quality outcomes for those the profession is designed to serve, he believed the professionalization of emerging fields could lead to a lack of autonomous expertise and inhibit the service ideal of the organization. So why then would these fields engage in this process? The struggle for legitimacy and power can be powerful motivators (Wilensky, 1964).

Collegiate recreation has been engaged in such a struggle for decades. First, informal programming previously organized by students was taken over to mitigate risk and add structure (Milton, 2008; Stewart, 1992). However, women and men’s experiences in recreation were organized apart from one another. Women’s recreational opportunities on campuses were often embedded within women’s physical education programs, had less resources, and separate and/or smaller facilities than their men counterparts. Organized intramural competitions for men first began in the early half of the 20th century and were often run by athletic coaches. Outliers such as Ohio State University and the University of Michigan began standalone programs.

In 1950, Dr. William Wasson of Dillard University brought together individuals from 11 HBCUs and formed the NIA, a precursor to NIRSA, the professional association of collegiate recreation. The arch of progress did not always go in a straight line. Women were voted out of the organization in 1959 and then voted back in in 1971. A few different organizations supported women administrators and the recreation programs for
women on college campuses during this period, including the student-led Women’s Recreation Association, the Division of Girl’s and Women’s Sports (DGWS), which was a subset of the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (AAHPER). As time went on, the DGWS became more focused on intercollegiate competition. The National Intramural Sports Council under AAHPER filled this void (Dudenhoeffer, 1997). By 1971, many of these organizations became less necessary as the women’s and men’s physical education departments merged and co-recreational and women’s intramural opportunities grew significantly (NIRSA, n.d.; Varner, 1992).

While overall this eventual outcome of this period of professionalization for the field and for students who participated was a positive development, the reality for women’s administrators was different. As collegiate athletics grew on college campuses, so did the need for women’s athletic administrators. Some of the women administrators in physical education migrated to college athletics while those that stayed were subjugated to roles less than those of their men counterparts (Dudenhoeffer, 1997) similarly to what happen to deans of women when the offices of dean of women and deans of men merged in student affairs following World War II (Hevel, 2016).

As the struggle for resources on campuses grew, NIRSA launched the NIRSA Journal in 1977. The first collegiate recreation CAS standards followed in 1981 as well as the first professional credential, called the Recreational Sports Specialist certification program or the CRSS. A code of ethics was established in 1984 and a national headquarters for the association was built in 1989. NIRSA had become a full-time operation (NIRSA, n.d.). These developments may have served the association well in the
justification for the migration from reporting to athletic departments to reporting to student affairs in the 1990’s (Milton, 2008).

Meanwhile student affairs as a field was continuing to attempt to establish an essential body of knowledge that all practitioners should use to guide their work. Student development theory was adopted by many practitioners even though some scholars were skeptical of its utility (e.g., Bloland et al., 1994; Rogers, 1995). This on-going debate continued to threaten the professionalization of student affairs (McGill et al., 2021) even as student affairs associations created competencies including knowledge of formal student development theories (ACPA & NASPA, 2016), scholars wrote about the positive value of the knowledge itself (e.g., Burkard et al., 2005, Patton et al., 2016) and called on the importance of graduate preparatory programs in imbuing prospective practitioners with that essential knowledge (Ortiz, et al., 2015). The divide between scholars and practitioners in student affairs was growing. The impracticality of memorizing increasingly complex and nuanced formal theories that include different stages, vectors, models, and continuums and then applying them to practice to a variety of different contexts was becoming more and more evident (Evans & Guido, 2012; Love, 2012).

NIRSA, perhaps in part to justify its own existence within broader student affairs landscape, joined student affairs associations to publish Learning Reconsidered 2 (Keeling, 2006). The publication advocated for the use of intentional learning outcomes in the creation of programming for a variety of student affairs units. A few years later and a year after ACPA and NASPA had launched their own student development theory competency, NIRSA followed with its own (NIRSA, 2009). The creation of this student
development theory competency was a pivotal moment in the professionalization of collegiate recreation. At that time, the only empirical data we had at the time suggested there was not much value practitioners placed on a graduate preparatory degree in student affairs or MED-HESA (Patchett et al., 1997). Despite the fact that many practitioners would cite the concept of student development as the reason they entered the field (Bower et al., 2005), much of their practice is likely based on informal or tacit theories of development. The pressure to professionalize through standards and practices to align within student affairs led to a misalignment in the competency NIRSA indicates is needed to practice at the most basic level and the lived experiences of practitioners in collegiate recreation.

This misalignment led to the following broad questions. Is the continued professionalization of collegiate recreation a positive endeavor? What could or needs to change to align with the potential future landscape of higher education and student affairs? Where does collegiate recreation go next? To answer these questions, in this study I explored the personal and professional characteristics of collegiate recreation practitioners. Of particular interest was the educational pathways and institutional environments in which these practitioners work. Implications for future survey design on collegiate recreation practitioners and the need for scholarship by collegiate recreation practitioners became apparent. In addition, I sought to answer the following specific research questions:

1) What are the personal and professional characteristics of collegiate recreation practitioners?
2) What is the knowledge of and perceived usefulness of student development theory amongst collegiate recreation practitioners?

3) Is the knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory related to personal and professional characteristics?

4) What degree do collegiate recreation practitioners think a prospective graduate student should acquire if seeking a career in collegiate recreation?

5) To what extent are personal and professional characteristics of collegiate recreation practitioners related to the degree collegiate recreation practitioners think a prospective graduate student should acquire?

Knowledge of Student Development Theory

Knowledge and Personal Characteristics

Only 20 participants out of 225 or 9% in the survey identified their master’s degree field of study to be MED-HESA. For a profession that lists knowledge of student development theory as a part of a basic core competency, this figure may not be problematic if practitioners generally have knowledge of student development theory regardless of their educational pathway. However, this is not the case. More than half of all participants in the survey (n=120, 54%) self-reported only being able to name one or no formal student development theories compared. Only 24% indicated they could name three or more formal student development theories. Do MED-HESA degree holders fare better? Yes, (n=16) 80% of MED-HESA degree holders indicated they could name two or more theories while only 43% of non-MED-HESA degree holders could do the same ($\chi^2 = 10.3, p = .001$). There are two takeaways: while far from perfect, graduate
preparatory programs do assist prospective practitioners with essential knowledge acquisition (Ortiz et al., 2015) and second, while 20% is a small number, it is possible for non-MED-HESA degree holders to acquire this knowledge in other ways.

**Knowledge and Environment**

The relationships of the institution type and the self-reported formal student development theories one could name and the reporting unit of the participants and the theories one could name were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4.7$, $p = .031$ and $\chi^2 = 4.4$, $p = .035$, respectively). Both two-thirds of those participants in the survey who worked at four-year private institutions and two-thirds of all participants who work in units that report to non-student affairs units, could name only one or no formal student development theories. This similarity is likely due to schools reporting to student affairs are more likely to have practitioners engage with student development theory than those not reporting to student affairs. Less than half of private institutions report to student affairs. Therefore the number of practitioners with high levels of knowledge of student development theory may be similar at both private institutions and in non-student affairs reporting units.

Collegiate recreation departments with bigger enrollments are more likely to report to student affairs than not. Schools with 20,001+ students reported to student affairs 86% of the time compared to schools with 20,000 or fewer students reported to student affairs 70% of the time ($\chi^2 = 9.9$, $p = .002$). Therefore, it should come to no surprise that participants who worked at institutions with 20,001+ students had more knowledge about student development theory. There were 53% of practitioners who worked at institutions with 20,001 or more students who self-reported they could name
two or more student development theories. Whereas only 38% of practitioners who worked at institutions with 20,000 or fewer students could do the same.

**Perceived Usefulness of Student Development Theory**

As stated above, in aggregate there is an alarming lack of knowledge about student development theory in a field that lists such knowledge as a basic core competency to do the job. However, this begs the question of whether collegiate recreation practitioners believe such knowledge is essential. Indeed, they do not. When asked, “how useful, if at all, are formal student development theories or concepts in your day-to-day practice,” only 45% indicated they were very useful (11%) or somewhat useful (34%). Slightly useful (37%), not at all useful (8%), and I am not familiar enough with formal development theories (11%), were selected 55% of the time. It appears the core competency does not align with the lived experiences of most collegiate recreation practitioners.

There were no statistically significant relationships found between any of the independent variables and perceived usefulness of student development theory. This finding is in contrast to the significance found between knowledge of student development theories and personal and institutional contexts that practitioners work in. The reason for this insignificance may be because most practitioners do not find formal student development theory very or even somewhat useful in their day-to-day practice even with the likelihood that positive response bias is fairly high (Dillman et al., 2014). Practitioners are told they are supposed to know something and use it in their daily practice. Therefore, they will inflate their true view of the usefulness in their response due to the purported norms in the industry. In all likelihood the perceived usefulness of
formal student development theory or concepts in practitioners’ daily practice may be even lower than the data implies. More data and/or a more robust sample may be necessary to rule out any association with perceived usefulness of student development theory and any personal or institutional factors noted previously, but I did not find any in the data collected in this study.

Degree Advice for Prospective Graduate Students

One of the questions I sought to answer was, since the migration of collegiate recreation programs to student affairs in the 90’s (Milton, 2008), has there been a shift in the perceived importance of MED-HESA degrees? Aiken (1993) advised prospective graduate students to obtain a degree that aligns with students’ long-term career goals. Patchett et al. (1997) found that collegiate recreation directors did not place much importance on MED-HESA degrees for future directors. Overall, the advice that Aiken (1993) gave still seems quite common amongst collegiate recreation practitioners with 30% of participants indicating they would advise similarly based on the student’s initial area of specialization. Twenty-seven percent of practitioners who would advise a prospective graduate student to get a MED-HESA degree and 43% of practitioners would suggest a non-MED-HESA degree. While the number of suggested MED-HESA degrees is lower than either of the other two response categories, the number is higher than that of those who hold actual MED-HESA degrees. This suggests some shift in favor of this degree pathway. It will be interesting to see if the numbers between these three advice response categories get closer over time.

Degree Advice and Personal Characteristics
MED-HESA degree holders valued their degree more than non-MED-HESA degree holders. In fact, only (n=89) 44% of non-MED-HESA degree holders indicated they would advise a prospective graduate student to acquire a specific non-MED-HESA degree compared to (n=2) 10% of MED-HESA degree holders ($\chi^2 = 10.8$, $p = .004$). On the other hand, while there were only 20 MED-HESA degree holders, 63 total participants would advise prospective graduate students to earn a MED-HESA degree. So not only do MED-HESA degree holders value their degrees more, there are considerable number of participants with non-MED-HESA degrees who also value MED-HESA degrees.

**Degree Advice and Environment**

Participants from four-year private institutions would suggest a non-MED-HESA degree much more than those working at four-year public institutions (n=41) 61% to (n=76) 37% respectively ($\chi^2 = 12.4$, $p = .002$). Participants from private institutions indicated they would advise a degree based on their initial area of specialization 24% of the time compared to 32% of the time for participants from four-year public institutions. The lower number of those advising for a degree in the specialization at private schools may be because the private schools are more likely to have smaller enrollments. This could mean that there are smaller departments and therefore more collegiate recreation generalists as opposed to more specialists at larger public institutions. However, there was not a significant difference in those practitioners who would advise a prospective student to obtain a degree based on their initial area of specialization at schools with more or less than 20,000 students.

**Regional Difference in the Professionalization of Collegiate Recreation**
NIRSA Region 1 had several notable differences from the other regions. There were considerably more private schools, more schools with smaller enrollments, less schools reported to student affairs, and less practitioners with a graduate assistantship experience. Regional differences in self-reported knowledge student development theory were not statistically significant, but the environments where practitioners were less likely to have knowledge of student development theory were located more often in Region 1. While collegiate recreation may lag behind other student affairs units in the professionalization of their field, Region 1 seems to be an outlier in comparison to the other NIRSA regions.

Do collegiate recreation departments have similar resources in Region 1 than they do in other NIRSA regions? While there was no data collected in the current study that can answer this question, 37% of Region 1 collegiate recreation departments report to non-student affairs units. It is plausible to believe there may be differences in infrastructure, fiscal, and staffing resource allocations to departments in different reporting structures. Further inquiry should determine if Region 1 indeed does have less access to these resources.

**Current Tensions with Hiring Environment and Equity**

At the same time there appear to be gaps in the professionalization of collegiate recreation and student affairs generally and within collegiate recreation between Region 1 and other regions, there are tensions around equitable hiring practices and credentialing that signifies essential knowledge acquisition, such as particular master’s degree fields of study. In fact, many calling for equitable hiring practices suggest dropping degree requirements for jobs in collegiate recreation. Some have moved away from hosting
graduate assistants in their collegiate recreation departments. Instead, some departments are hiring those with a bachelor’s degree and encouraging them to enroll in graduate programs while working full-time (e.g., University of Florida, Virginia Commonwealth University). The current hiring environment has been difficult for hiring managers in higher education (Moody, 2022). Some hiring managers may attempt to find a larger applicant pools by lessening additional experiential requirements.

**Implications for Collegiate Recreation**

What does this do to the professionalization of collegiate recreation? Most do not currently engage with the essential knowledge the field professes is necessary to do the job in their graduate degree program. Most also claim to learn the most useful knowledge about working with students on the job as opposed to their graduate assistantship or classroom work. Therefore, the field must reflect on the lived realities of practitioners and the institutional environments these practitioners work in. If student development theory is important, then creating buy-in to its usefulness must become a priority for the profession. Second, the ways in which scholars and presenters talk about student development theory must adapt to the current realities of practitioners. Scholars and presenters should spend more time on particular concepts from different theories and encourage use of a bricolage approach (Evans & Guido, 2012). In time, NIRSA practitioners may find theory or concept use more valuable in their institutional context than blanket theories that are implied to work in all contexts (Love, 2012). Furthermore, NIRSA should acknowledge the history often cited and shared of the birth of formal collegiate recreation departments was primarily programming for men (e.g., Dudenhoeffer, 1997; Horowitz, 1987; Stewart, 1992), but that doesn’t mean opportunities
for recreation were not happening on campuses and that there were not pioneers in women’s recreation in the 20th Century (e.g., Dudenhoeffer, 1997; Horowitz, 1987; Stewart, 1992).

**Interview Insights**

As stated above, the quantitative data showed a general lack of student development theory knowledge and the interview participants echoed this. Peter reflected, “I think you could ask every person that attended the annual conference this year and you’d get less than 100 people who could articulate theories and models that describe the development of college students (1700 attended). There was also a lack of perceived importance of student development theory in the quantitative data. However, there were some differences of opinion related to the importance of student development theory from interview participants. Amelia emphasized the following: I want to be the best professional I can be for the students who I care so deeply about but who come to me with complex issues or who I don’t understand why one student is struggling and another is thriving. And these students who have vastly different backgrounds than I do, whether it be racial backgrounds or educational backgrounds and you know that is what led me down the path to get my advance [degree], because I was looking for those answers, and they didn’t exist unless I was going to go back into the classroom. Conversely, Sue said the following: …I feel like a lot of people don’t think about that day to day or even often and I find like it can be useful for big picture thinking... I don’t even know that it’s
needed for a lot of positions, except when they start to get more into the big picture stuff. I guess understanding students in their development is helpful.

She went on to explain that she knows of theory experts who are known for their theory knowledge and teaching of theory, but they still do not use it in their day-to-day practice.

Those interview participants that had graduate assistantships placed important value on the graduate assistantship itself, not necessarily the degree field. Kate said the following:

I think it was kind of always a joke in our generation that you didn’t really need a master’s degree, you needed a two-year GA (graduate assistant) position to know what you were doing. And without that I think it’s hard, because while we all work our tails off during those two years, what you gain from that is irreplaceable.

Have current hiring challenges have further eroded this knowledge and the prioritization of it during on-boarding with many candidates now coming from outside the field and/or without a graduate assistantship or internship in collegiate recreation?

Most of the participants felt change was here and that collegiate recreation and higher education in general need to change to stay competitive and recruit candidates. As far as student development theory knowledge and use, individuals in collegiate recreation lacked it before the pandemic and the current hiring climate has only exacerbated this lack of essential knowledge on top of the practical experience that people had in traditional paraprofessional roles prior to becoming a full-time practitioner.

Suggestions for Practice
If it becomes less likely for applicants for collegiate recreation positions to have had graduate assistant experience, then those hiring may need to spend critical time and energy rethinking the on-boarding process for new employees in their departments. If the graduate paraprofessional role goes away, it may become necessary for newly hired employees without a master’s and/or without a graduate assistantship to go through an intensive year-long process that condenses the aforementioned graduate assistantship experience. Eventually, this may mean the proliferation of stand-alone professional development positions focused on coaching new employees through the intensive year-long on-boarding process. The on-boarding may also include partnerships with academic departments that have expertise in student development theory. In addition, if student development theory is agreed upon to be valuable by the department, division of student affairs, etc., then perhaps connecting these new practitioners to resources to fill in their knowledge gaps will also be part of that process even if the graduate assistantship model persists. If the practitioner earned a non-MED-HESA degree, more emphasis on student development theory, if they earned a MED-HESA degree, more time on risk management. While a credentialing process for middle-managers or those who then could be described as professionals (Arminio, 2011), is a welcomed development, separate specific competencies for entry level employees that also consider one’s institution type and reporting structure could help the professionalization of the industry through creating shared expectations. Those expectations could lead to more standardized training and professional development opportunities tailored to both the individual’s pathway and their work environment. For example, development opportunities specifically for those who work for a private school of 10,000 students that reports to Athletics.
The advice one gives a prospective graduate student should consider the individual’s future goals as Aiken (1993) alluded. However, if a student chooses a MED-HESA degree, the advice may include taking an elective in facility design or sport law, etc. Conversely, if a non-MED-HESA degree, then the advice may include taking an elective on Student Development Theory.

Methods

NIRSA Gatekeeping

NIRSA indicated this study, “was likely the largest survey of the association by individual member specifically for a research study” (R. Guzman, personal communication, June 26, 2018). At the same time, I did not have access to the membership lists. NIRSA sent out the survey to protect members, and I made sure it was an anonymous link. The issue this presents is that if a participant began filling out the survey, I could not remind the individual participant. Instead, multiple reminders were sent to the entire random sample. This meant that when those same individuals who did not finish went back to the survey, they started over, increasing the chances for measurement error (Dillman et al., 2014). While I understand the need to protect the membership data when addressing cyber security issues, other student affairs associations allow their membership lists to be used by researchers (e.g., Miles, 2013; Naifeh & Kearney, 2021). Both ACPA and NASPA are much larger organizations, and their memberships are therefore conducting more research, but if NIRSA wants to close the professionalization gap between collegiate recreation and student affairs, I suggest that NIRSA remove barriers to more rigorous scholarly work.

To Screen or Not to Screen
While screening out certain subsections of my population of interest may seem prudent, it can lead to unintended questions that may have been answered if the participants were allowed to continue. For example, how would the knowledge and perceived usefulness of student development theory of those with bachelor’s have differed from those with master’s degrees?

Random Sample vs. Census Survey

A random sample was used in this survey to avoid substantial amounts of non-response error. However, because some of the questions had several response categories, some of the resulting data was difficult to compare to other data points. For example, race/ethnicity had too little data to compare it to practitioner’s NIRSA region they worked in. Instead, if a census survey was used, more usable data could be accessed. The resulting data from a census survey may include the increased likelihood for non-response error, but researchers can weigh particular underrepresented data more in their analysis (Dillman et al., 2014).

Suggestions for Future Research

The data utilized in this study were gathered prior to the pre-Covid 19 Pandemic. The study should be replicated to assess whether the demographic characteristics of collegiate recreation practitioners have changed since the on-set of the pandemic, but perhaps completed as a census survey to get enough data to use across under-represented populations including, but not limited to race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Resource allocations, institution type, reporting structures, and geographic region should be included in future studies. Future studies should also explore the different functional sub-unit sub contexts that collegiate recreation practitioners start their
careers in. In addition, the titles and perceived usefulness of student development theory should continue to be explored to rule out any personal or environmental contexts associated with the perceived usefulness of the theory.

While it was important to bound the limits of the current study, in the future, it is suggested those practitioners who have a bachelor’s degree as the highest earned degree or work in two-year institutions are not screened out. This data could be used to further explore atypical pathways into the field. Future quantitative research should control for different variables to find the best predictor of variables to further the understanding of how personal and professional characteristics may influence essential knowledge acquisition and practice. Future research should also include qualitative methods to elevate the voices of collegiate recreation practitioners, specifically of those with smaller enrollments, reporting to non-student affairs units, and those with underrepresented identities. Future studies could also include other student affairs units to help ascertain if there are varying levels of professionalization in a variety of different student affairs units.

Conclusion

*The Typical Collegiate Recreation Practitioner*

The typical collegiate recreation practitioner pre-Covid-19 first got into the field by seeking a graduate assistantship. Often, the prospective graduate student emphasized the graduate assistantship in their search and applied for the graduate assistantship prior to applying for the graduate school, although many applied to the graduate school and assistantship at the same time. While the typical pathways may have or are still shifting,
due to the pandemic and changes in the hiring climate, no empirical data can confirm this as of yet.

While no new data has been collected since the pandemic, and some of the traditional pathways may have changed, it is safe to say the following statements about practitioners’ educational pathways. Most collegiate recreation practitioners do not hold MED-HESA degrees. Most collegiate recreation practitioners work in departments that report to student affairs (even more so true at public institutions than private ones), but also do not think that student development theory is very useful or somewhat useful in their daily practice. In fact, most collegiate recreation practitioners can name one or no student development theories. Collegiate recreation practitioners believe they learned more working with students while working full-time rather than their experience in their graduate assistantship or graduate internship. In addition, only a small percentage of practitioners indicated they learned the most about working with students in their graduate school classes. Most practitioners would advise prospective graduate students to earn a non-MED-HESA degree or acquire a degree in the area of collegiate recreation specialization they are entering (e.g., sport management for intramurals, kinesiology for fitness). Less than a third of collegiate recreation practitioners would advise prospective graduate students to acquire a MED-HESA degree. However, MED-HESA degree holders appear to value their degree much more than non-MED-HESA degree holders.

Influences at Play

There are a number of personal and professional characteristics related to the knowledge of student development theory and how practitioners would advise a prospective graduate student entering the field. There was more knowledge of student
development theory amongst those reporting to student affairs, amongst those working at a public institution, amongst those working at schools with higher enrollments, and amongst those who had MED-HESA degrees. Degree advice for prospective graduate students is related to master’s degree earned and institution type. The practitioners who worked for a public institution and had a MED-HESA degree all would suggest a MED-HESA degree more so than those that did not. The differences in the levels of essential knowledge suggest various levels of professionalization amongst varying contexts in collegiate recreation, including geographical. Professionalization or not, laudable collegiate recreation work gets done daily in all of these aforementioned contexts. Understanding how those personal and environmental contexts differ and may influence how one practices is worthy of further investigation.

*Is Professionalization Good?*

Professionalization is good when it is done intentionally to avoid excluding parts of the membership of the field. Professionalization can lead to shared standards and practices (Wilensky, 1964) that produce better outcomes for the population the organization is serving. For example, the principle of inclusion in student affairs and collegiate recreation may lead to more campuses utilizing policies that aim to increase the sense of belonging amongst marginalized identities on campuses. However, like all formal theories cannot be used as a blanket to cover all institutional contexts (Rogers, 1995), the standards, practices, and competencies that have been an outgrowth of professionalization must not suggest they are relevant for all collegiate recreation departments either. Especially in today’s pandemic-concurrent hiring climate, if NIRSA continues to suggest these competencies are necessary to practice, the gap between the
misalignment of competencies and lived experiences of its practitioners will grow. Further, practitioners may become increasingly skeptical that NIRSA represents their professional experience, institutional context, or that NIRSA can improve their professional practice. If NIRSA becomes irrelevant to collegiate recreation practitioners, the professionalization of the field that the association and its many practitioners have strived for will be threatened.

**Necessary Changes**

To continue to align with the future of higher education and student affairs, practitioner scholarship must grow in collegiate recreation. This includes reducing barriers to access to membership data for researchers. The wellbeing of college students has come into focus recently. Collegiate recreation departments may gain more institutional support if they have more data confirming the intersection of improved wellbeing and/or have the knowledge and assessment tools to evaluate their own campus context.

The limitations of the professionalization of the field may mean either a broader approach to prescribed professional ideals or more intention to the specific context of the individual and the environment. Said another way, NIRSA must continue to challenge practitioners to expand their knowledge but also give practical and usable resources to meet reasonable competency outcomes based on typical and atypical educational pathways and work environments. For example, instead of using an aspirational competency for everyone, use the same competency, but acknowledge it may not be achievable until year three or four of professional practice. On the other hand, providing specific competencies for those in different contexts may also be useful. Does someone
working at a private school of 5000 students that reports to athletics need to know the same things as a practitioner working at a public-school reporting to student affairs with an enrollment of 40,000? Using an updated credentialing process for student affairs that also has a special component for experienced collegiate recreation practitioners is a welcomed innovation, but it begs the question whether there is a barrier to access and what assessment of entry level practitioners can help guide their development and essential knowledge acquisition?

Practitioners may need to reflect on how the industry has changed since they were entering graduate school or became an entry level practitioner and adapt their advice for prospective graduate students and entry level practitioners accordingly. As a field, the narrative around formal theory should adopt a bricolage approach to find practical applications for everyday use. Identifying concepts that inform, reject, and/or confirm tacit experiential knowledge and that can be applied to specific contexts may eliminate a barrier to engagement with theory for practitioners. Further acknowledging the differences in the educational pathways of collegiate recreation practitioners and NASPA and ACPA members may lead to more resources to fill knowledge gaps at the association, division, and department levels. I believe most seasoned practitioners would agree that most of these changes would benefit the field, even if NIRSA is slow to adopt them. The current moment we are in demands reflection and acknowledgement of these changes, but the promise of collegiate recreation as a profession and its overall impact for institutions of higher learning and for the students who attend, has never been greater.
NIRSA STUDENT DEVELOPMENT SURVEY

What title best describes your current employment status?

- Intern
- Graduate Assistant
- Professional
- Other (please specify) __________________________________________________

What professional title best describes your current position?

- Coordinator
- Assistant Director
- Senior Assistant Director
- Associate Director
- Senior Associate Director
- Director
- Other (please specify) __________________________________________________
What type of institution do you currently work for?

- 4-year public institution
- 4-year private institution
- 2-year institution
- I am currently in between jobs in collegiate recreation
- I have left the field of collegiate recreation

What is your ultimate career goal?

- Similar job, but at a larger institution
- Become a director of a collegiate recreation program
- Work in town recreation or commercial recreation (e.g., fitness businesses)
- Advance beyond a director of collegiate recreation to a senior student affairs officer
- Work in a different student affairs office
- Stay in current position
- Other (please specify) ____________________________________________
- Don't know
What is the highest educational degree you have earned?

- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Doctorate
- Other (please specify) ________________________________

How likely, if at all, are you to someday earn your doctorate degree?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Slightly likely
- Not at all likely
If you earn your doctorate degree, which field of study is most likely?

- Kinesiology/Exercise Science
- Leisure Studies
- Nutrition
- Public Health/Health Promotion
- Recreation Management
- Sports Management/Sports Administration
- Student Affairs/Student Personnel/Higher Education
- Other (please specify) ____________________________

How many years were you a professional in collegiate recreation before beginning your doctoral studies?

Please answer in whole numbers (e.g., 1, 4, 7, etc.)

- Years ____________________________
- I was not a professional in collegiate recreation before beginning my doctoral studies
What was your Doctoral degree field of study?

- Kinesiology/Exercise Science
- Leisure Studies
- Nutrition
- Public Health/Health Promotion
- Recreation Management
- Sports Management/Sports Administration
- Student Affairs/Student Personnel/Higher Education
- Other (please specify) __________________________________________________

How many years did it take to earn your doctoral degree?
Please answer in whole numbers (e.g., 2, 8, 12, etc.)
_______________________________________________________________
What was your Master's degree field of study?

- [ ] Kinesiology/Exercise Science
- [ ] Leisure Studies
- [ ] Nutrition
- [ ] Public Health/Health Promotion
- [ ] Recreation Management
- [ ] Sports Management/Sports Administration
- [ ] Student Affairs/Student Personnel/Higher Education
- [ ] Other (please specify) __________________________________________________

Did you have a graduate assistantship in collegiate recreation or graduate internship in collegiate recreation?
By graduate internship I mean an assistantship without a tuition waiver.

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Other (please specify) __________________________________________________

The next series of questions ask about your graduate assistantship search process.
Did you apply to the collegiate recreation program or the graduate school first?

- Collegiate recreation program
- Graduate school
- I applied to both at the same time
- Other (please specify) __________________________________________________

Why did you apply to the graduate school before applying to the collegiate recreation program?
____________________________________________________________________

Why did you apply to graduate school and the collegiate recreation program at the same time?
____________________________________________________________________

Which part of your graduate education did you prioritize more during the search process?

- I prioritized the <strong>assistantship</strong> over the graduate school
- I prioritized the <strong>graduate school</strong> over the assistantship

<strong>The next series of questions ask more questions about you and the program you are currently working in.</strong>
What is your gender identity? Mark all that apply.

- Woman
- Man
- Transgender
- Gender non-conforming
- Genderqueer
- Other ________________________________

What is your sexual identity?

- Heterosexual/straight
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Queer
- Asexual
- Pansexual
- Other ________________________________
What is your race/ethnicity? Mark all that apply.

- American Indian or Alaskan Native (including Central and South America)
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- Indian Subcontinent
- Middle Eastern
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White

Not including internships or graduate assistantships, how long have you been a professional in collegiate recreation?

- 0-3 years
- 4-7 years
- 8-11 years
- 12-15 years
- 16-19 years
- 20+ years
What area of specialization did your job primarily entail when you first started your professional career in collegiate recreation?

- [ ] Aquatics
- [ ] Facility Management
- [ ] Fitness
- [ ] Intramurals
- [ ] Marketing
- [ ] Membership
- [ ] Outdoor Recreation
- [ ] Special Events
- [ ] Sport Clubs
- [ ] Wellness
- [ ] Other ________________________________
What NIRSA region you are currently working in?

- Region 1
- Region 2
- Region 3
- Region 4
- Region 5
- Region 6
- Region Canada
- Not Applicable

Which unit or division from the list below best describes where your collegiate recreation program reports to?

- Student Affairs/Student Life
- Athletics
- Physical Education
- Auxiliary Services
- Other (please specify) ________________________________
What is your current school's enrollment (undergraduate and graduate students combined)?

- [ ] 1-5,000
- [ ] 5,001-10,000
- [ ] 10,001-15,000
- [ ] 15,001-20,000
- [ ] 20,001-25,000
- [ ] 25,001-30,000
- [ ] 30,001-35,000
- [ ] 35,001-40,000
- [ ] 40,001+

The next series of questions ask how important or useful having different kinds of knowledge is to your current work in collegiate recreation.
In your current work, how important, if at all, is it that you have a high level of knowledge about...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Slightly Important</th>
<th>Not at all Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal theories of student development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An area of specialization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g., fitness, outdoor rec)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends in higher education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends in collegiate recreation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where did you learn the most useful knowledge about working with students?

- [ ] Graduate school classes
- [ ] Graduate work experience (e.g., graduate assistantship or internship)
- [ ] Professional work experience
- [ ] Other (please specify) _________________________________
How useful, if at all, are formal student development theories or concepts in your day to day practice?

- Very useful
- Somewhat useful
- Slightly useful
- Not at all useful
- I am not familiar enough with formal student development theories

How knowledgeable, if at all, are you about student development theories?

- Very knowledgeable
- Somewhat knowledgeable
- Slightly knowledgeable
- Not at all knowledgeable

How many, if any, formal student development theories can you name?

- 1
- 2
- 3 or more
- None
What are the formal student development theories you can name?
Please answer what you can or name up to three and move on

________________________________________________________________

What formal student development theories (if any) do you use most frequently?
________________________________________________________________

Do you perceive a difference of understanding of what student development is amongst your colleagues?

○ Yes

○ No

○ I don't know
What do you believe is the biggest reason for these differences in understanding of student development?

- Difference in degree fields of study
- Difference in quality of mentors
- Difference of time in the profession
- Difference in area of specialization in collegiate recreation (e.g., aquatics, fitness, sport clubs)
- Difference in work environment
- Difference in personal politics/worldviews
- Other (please specify) ___________________________________________________________________
- I don't know why there is a difference
If a student is planning on a career in collegiate recreation, which Master's degree would be the best choice (assuming they have a choice)?

- Kinesiology/Exercise Science
- Leisure Studies
- Nutrition
- Public Health/Health Promotion
- Recreation Management
- Sports Management/Sports Administration
- Student Affairs/Student Personnel/Higher Education
- Depends on their initial area of specialization (e.g., facilities, fitness)
- Other (please specify) ________________________________

---

If you were able to go back in time, would you change each of the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master's degree field of study</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial area within collegiate recreation to specialize in (e.g., fitness, intramurals)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of assistantship</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How much did you learn about each of the following during your graduate education (inside and outside the classroom)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>More than necessary</th>
<th>The right amount</th>
<th>Less than the right amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risk management</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends in collegiate recreation</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends in higher education</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment practices</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal student development theories</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1

*Sample compared to NIRSA & ACPA/NASPA Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sample %</th>
<th>NIRSA %</th>
<th>ACPA/NASPA %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NIRSA Regions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 1</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 2</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 3</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 4</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region Canada</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Title*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Sample %</th>
<th>NIRSA %</th>
<th>ACPA/NASPA %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>29.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>26.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Assistant Director</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Director</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Associate Director</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Non-conforming</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender/other</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>&lt;1</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10**</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a/x</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5***</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Subcontinent</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>.4</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Unassigned to a NIRSA region
**NIRSA data is African American
***NIRSA data is Hispanic
Table 2

Region and Institution Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>4-Year Public</th>
<th>4-Year Private</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region 1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 2</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region 6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

*Incomplete Data vs. Complete Data*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Incomplete Data</th>
<th>Complete Data</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>NIRSA Region</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution Type</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting Unit</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree Advice</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Survey Responses</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting Unit</td>
<td>4-Year Public</td>
<td>4-Year Private</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
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<td>--------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Affairs</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Others (Non-Student Affairs)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>67</td>
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</table>
Table 5

Enrollment and Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Region 1</th>
<th>Region 2</th>
<th>Region 3</th>
<th>Region 4</th>
<th>Region 5</th>
<th>Region 6</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5001-10,000</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>10,001-15,000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>15,001-20,000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,001-25,000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,001-30,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>30,001-35,000</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>35,001-40,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,001+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
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<td>72</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Valid Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7

Master’s Degree Field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree Field</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinesiology/Exercise Science</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure Studies</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Health/Health Promotion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation Management</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Management/Sports Administration</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Affairs/Student Personnel/Higher Education</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>225</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

*Career Goal and Current Title*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Goal</th>
<th>Coordinator</th>
<th>Assistant/Senior Assistant</th>
<th>Associate/Senior Associate</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Become a director of a collegiate recreation program</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work in town recreation or commercial recreation (e.g., fitness businesses)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advance beyond a director of collegiate recreation to a senior student affairs officer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work in a different student affairs office</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar job, but at a larger institution</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay in current position</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9

*Knowledge of Student Development Theory*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How many, if any, formal student development theories can you name?</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>270</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10

*Perceived Usefulness of Student Development Theory*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How useful, if at all, are formal student development theories or concepts in your day to day practice?</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat useful</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly useful</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all useful</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not familiar enough with formal student development theories</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful, if at all, are formal student development theories or concepts in your day to day practice?</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very or Somewhat</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly or Not at All</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Familiar Enough</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>274</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 12

**Degree Advice for Prospective Graduate Students in Collegiate Recreation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If a student is planning on a career in collegiate recreation, which master's degree would be the best choice (assuming they have a choice)?</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinesiology/Exercise Science</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure Studies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Health/Health Promotion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation Management</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Management/Sports Administration</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Affairs/Student Personnel/Higher Education</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends on their initial area of specialization</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13

*Degree Advice for Prospective Graduate Students in Collegiate Recreation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree Advice</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-MED-HESA</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MED-HESA</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends on specialization</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


145


148


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Oklahoma State University. (n.d.) *Department of Wellness*. https://wellness.okstate.edu/recreation/index.html


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