FROM FRUSTRATED TO EMPOWERED: EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF HOW MID-LEVEL STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS MAKE MEANING OF THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

by

Evan Baum

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

Committee:

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Date: _____ Summer Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to those who struggle to reconcile the divergence that exists within their organizations between what is espoused and what is practiced.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank many individuals who have helped me reach this point in my scholarly and professional journey.

First, the faculty of the Higher Education Program at George Mason University has been instrumental in helping me identify and refine the area of focus for this study. I am especially grateful for the feedback and mentoring offered by my committee. I could not have asked for a more accessible, thoughtful, or encouraging chairperson than Dr. Jan Arminio, and greatly appreciate the wisdom provided along the way by Dr. Julie Owen and Dr. Todd Rose. I am also very thankful for the support of Dr. Jamie Lester and Dr. Nance Lucas for their dedication to my growth throughout the program of study and portfolio process.

Additionally, the learning I was able to do in working with the faculty of George Mason's Organizational Development and Knowledge Management program allowed me to greatly strengthen the overall framework upon which this study was built. Dr. Tojo Thatchenkery, Dr. Ann Baker, and Dr. Mark Addleson designed and facilitated an exceptional degree program that has allowed me to think more complexly in my work with and study of organizations.

I also owe tremendous thanks and appreciation to faculty mentors and graduate student colleagues from the University of Maryland, College Park, each of whom played a foundational role in my initial entry into the field of higher education. Being afforded the opportunity to work on scholarly research projects and grant opportunities early in my career propelled me to where I am today, and I am forever indebted to Dr. Jeffrey Milem, Dr. Laura Perna, Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt, Dr. Susan Komives, Dr. Danette Howard, and Dr. Neal Hutchens.

I also need to thank two former colleagues from The George Washington University – Dr. James Kohl and the soon-to-be Dr. Matt Trainum. Both James and Matt have been professional role models for me and showed me that it is possible to pursue a doctoral degree while working full-time. My dissertation timeline has paralleled Matt's closely, and I have greatly appreciated the opportunities to commiserate with him about our respective successes and challenges along the way.

Similarly, it is unlikely that I would not have found a passion for the topic explored by this study were it not for the role I was able to play in the strategic planning process for

University Life at George Mason University. I would like to thank Rose Pascarell for her confidence in me and allowing me to make a contribution to that process, as my participation in it allowed me to hone in on the focus of this study. My other UL colleagues who formed the coordinating committee for that project – Ashley Sieman, Carrie Klein, Alissa Karton, Amy Snyder, Lewis Forest, and Hollie Chessman – also deserve significant credit for their roles on the project and how their work informed my thinking in this study. I need to further acknowledge Hollie, as our paths in the doctoral program were very similar and I greatly appreciate all of the feedback she provided me along the way, as well as the opportunity to reciprocate, as offering her feedback on her journey helped to clarify my own.

I would also not have reached this point without the commitment and dedication of the participants in this study. I know it was not easy for them to set aside the time to participate in interviews and keep a journal for the duration of this study, and for that they will always have my gratitude. Without the time they were able to give me I would not be in a position to present the rich findings that follow. I have learned a great deal from each of them and will always remember the conversations we were able to have during this project.

Finally, I need to thank members of my immediate family. I attribute my work ethic to my mother and father, as they instilled in me the perseverance that has made them successful in their lives. My sister, who has herself shown a sense of resilience in the face of obstacles she has encountered, which have been inspirational to me and others around her. My grandmother, who may be the kindest person I know, and who ends every conversation by wishing me nothing but the best in life. My in-laws, who have been like a second set of parents to me, and without their generosity I would not be in a position to do everything that I am able to do. Finally, I am eternally grateful to my beautiful and brilliant wife, Beth, for her love, for her believing in me, and for proofreading this study and just about every other important paper I have written over the last ten years.

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ABSTRACT

FROM FRUSTRATED TO EMPOWERED: EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF HOW MID-LEVEL STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS MAKE MEANING OF THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

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This dissertation explored the process by which ten mid-level student affairs professionals at ten different large public universities make meaning of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. The study was informed by literature from a diverse range of disciplines, including psychology, management, sociology, and education, which provided a foundation for studying the experiences of participants at cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal levels. This study utilized grounded theory for its methodology, which guided the development of sampling criteria, data collection protocols, and data analysis procedures. Participants in the study were identified by themselves or a colleague as being "superb" at fulfilling their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes in a programmatic functional area within student affairs. After being recruited, participants were interviewed, and subsequently kept a reflective journal over an eight-week period. Following the final

submission of their journal to the researcher, participants were interviewed again to collect additional data and also to member-check preliminary findings.

Following a multi-step memoing and coding process to analyze the data that was collected, a theoretical model emerged to illustrate that participants understood their responsibilities through four overlapping lenses of the self, team/department, division/institution, and external audiences. Within each lens, the findings illustrated the growth of participants from holding a frustrated mindset towards their responsibilities in assessing student learning outcomes, to an empowered mindset, influenced and aided by four meaning making catalysts. The final chapter discussed the implications of the study's theoretical model and related findings for student affairs professionals at all levels, faculty members in student affairs graduate preparation programs, leaders in student affairs associations, as well as other higher education researchers.

CHAPTER ONE

This study explored the process by which mid-level student affairs professionals at colleges and universities make meaning of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. The introductory chapter is divided into four parts. First, relevant background information is presented. Second, a brief overview of the proposed study and proposed research questions is provided. Third, the significance and potential value of the proposed study is articulated. Finally, a positionality statement is included.

Background

The role and responsibility of student affairs professionals in the delivery of experiences that foster learning and development of those enrolled in colleges and universities dates back to the origin of the profession, articulated by some of the most seminal documents from the field. Published in 1937, and revised in 1949, *The Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education) articulates the contribution of extra- and co-curricular experiences that supplement student learning that occurs in the classroom. Over the last 75 years, these foundational documents have been updated and reflected upon (American College Personnel Association (hereafter ACPA), 2012; ACPA, 1996; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (hereafter NASPA), 1997; NASPA, 1987), influencing *Learning Reconsidered* (ACPA & NASPA, 2004) and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (ACPA & NASPA, 2010a). Throughout the

revisions and updates, the responsibility of student affairs professionals for fostering student learning and development outside of the classroom has consistently remained a core principle of the field.

However, the responsibility for assessing co-curricular experiences offered by student affairs professionals and demonstrating that student learning outcomes are being achieved is a professional competency and responsibility that has more recently emerged. Pope and Reynolds (1997) articulated assessment and evaluation as one of seven core competencies of student affairs professionals in a widely influential publication that was a springboard for more recent documents describing broad professional competencies and standards in the field (ACPA & NASPA, 2010b; Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2010), assessment skills and knowledge standards (ACPA, 2006), and the role of student affairs in accreditation (ACPA, 2013). Bresciani (2011c) argued that student affairs professionals are naturally curious about the effectiveness of their efforts and want to inquire about the outcomes of their work because of their passion for creating high-quality, holistic student learning experiences. Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) described this evolution of student affairs assessment, "at least conceptually, [assessment] has moved away from evaluating students' use of and participation in services and programs to measuring how programs and experiences contribute to students' learning" (p. 6).

Given the espoused importance of student learning in the field of student affairs, one might assume that the supporting literature on the topic is robust. However, studies exploring the experiences of student affairs professionals in fulfilling their

responsibilities for demonstrating student learning outcomes have been limited in both scope and number. Specifically, three distinct yet interrelated areas of publication exist within the literature. First, studies exist that can be classified as "how to" studies – those that explore the practice of implementing assessment efforts to demonstrate student learning with the field of student affairs (Astin, 2013; Banta & Kuh, 1998; Barham & Scott, 2006; Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2013; Bresciani, 2011a; Bresciani, 2011b; Bresciani, 2002; Collins & Roberts, 2012; Doyle, 2004; Green, 2006; Green, Jones, & Aloi, 2008; Hodes, 2009; Julian, 2013; Kirsky, 2010; Kuh, 1995; Livingston & Zerulik, 2013; Manderino & Meents-DeCaigny, 2012; Oburn, 2005; Rothenberg, 2011; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Schuh, 2013; Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, & Dean, 2012; Slager & Oaks, 2013; Suskie, 2009; Terenzini, 1989; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). These writings provide meaningful background for framing the research questions proposed by this study.

Second, a number of publications have been produced that can be grouped together as exploring global skill and knowledge competency of student affairs professionals, primarily through the perspectives of senior student affairs officers and graduate preparation program faculty (Carpenter & Stimson, 2007; Cooper & Saunders, 2000; Herdlein, Reifler, & Mrowka, 2013; Herdlein, 2004; Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Tull & Kuk; 2012). This second set of studies, also to be reviewed in greater depth in the subsequent chapter, illustrates the ways in which assessment as a student affairs competency has been selectively framed by a narrow set of perspectives within the field.

Lastly, a third clustering of studies have examined the experiences and competency abilities of entry-level professionals in student affairs (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Dickerson, Hoffman, Anan, Brown, Vong, Bresciani, Monzon, & Oyler, 2011; Hoffman, 2010; Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006; Young & Janosik, 2007). This last set of studies helps to define a gap in the literature around student affairs professionals and assessment competencies, illustrating that the research done in this area ignores those professionals for whom assessment of student learning outcomes is an increasingly significant aspect of their roles – mid-level professionals (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010).

Problem Overview

The ongoing conversation about accountability, institutional effectiveness, and data-driven decision-making in higher education provides additional relevant background to contextualize the problem explored in this study. The historical context informing the contemporary movement towards increased accountability and assessment in higher education can be tied to influential publications from the 1980s that argued for a more critical evaluation of the learning outcomes achieved from an undergraduate education in the United States (Ewell, 2003). More recently illustrated by the proceedings of the Spellings Commission (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), an evolving policy conversation within the United States is driving the trend towards increased formative and summative assessment practices (Suskie, 2009), influencing the extent to which all

aspects of colleges and universities are being pushed to demonstrate student learning (Cubarrubia, 2009).

This movement has extended beyond a need to assess learning that happens in the classroom to a desire for evaluating learning in non-classroom environments, influencing the scholarly evolution of student affairs as a profession (Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, & Dean, 2012). Carpenter (2001) argued that "Student affairs professionals can come to be held in the same regard [as faculty] if, and perhaps only if, we accrue the currency of the realm within which we live, if we begin to practice our craft in a manner befitting scholars" (p. 302), calling upon student affairs to develop a scholarship of practice that is intentional, peer reviewed, based on theory, and built upon a culture of evidence and data. Blimling (2013) wrote, "student affairs professionals need to be able to answer with empirical data about their stewardship of student money and their contributions to student life and learning" (p. 13), summarizing the increasing need within student affairs to track financial measures linking student programming to accounting benchmarks (Schuh, 2003). Additionally, student affairs professionals are being increasingly called upon to provide evidence to support reaccreditation processes, strategic planning efforts, and board-driven accountability conversations (Banta, Pike, & Hansen, 2009).

However, according to Schroeder and Pike (2001) a range of obstacles may exist that fully prevents student affairs professionals from becoming the scholar-practitioners capable of meeting these new demands, including insufficient mental models, inadequate preparation, lack of clear purpose, tyranny of the immediate, motivation, institutional context, and individual differences. Moreover, a more fundamental obstacle may be that

"absence from many of our actual evidence-based conversations, is a discussion of what we *don't* know about how learning and development occurs" (Bresciani, 2013, p. 101). The process of understanding and evaluating learning outcomes often requires multiple measures (Astin, 2013), and is not nearly as linear and straightforward as data-driven decision-making processes might suggest (Bresciani, 2013).

The three distinct yet interrelated areas of the literature articulated above – how to demonstrate student learning outcomes in student affairs, assessment of student learning as a student affairs competency standard, and the assessment competencies of entry-level student affairs professionals – can be understood in light of this broader policy context and conversation. In spite of the obstacles they may face, scholars have looked to further establish the ways in which student affairs professionals can contribute to the accountability movement in higher education. Additionally, the research examines the competencies and standards defined by the field that govern necessary professional skills and knowledge for executed assessment responsibilities. Lastly, it examines the extent to which professionals are prepared to fulfill these aspects of their jobs.

Problem statement. Viewed collectively, the policy context and scholarly literature cited above frame the problem explored by this study. Most fundamentally, the literature reaffirms that student affairs professionals have a responsibility for assessing student learning outcomes. Moreover, this responsibility is only increasing, as the knowledge base and skills required for performing learning outcomes-based assessment, research, and evaluation in student affairs work gain greater importance within the field and in the broader field of higher education.

At the same time, the literature also reflects a very noticeable gap and a very obvious challenge lying at the heart of this study. Specifically, there has been little attention given to the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals and their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. The absence of literature in this area is striking given the findings of Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) that show how responsibilities for assessing student learning appear most prevalently in position descriptions for mid-level roles. This problem is compounded by the findings of prior studies that overwhelmingly point to the perceived deficit among masters-level and entry-level student affairs professionals in the competency area of assessment, research, and evaluation. Furthermore, the absence of assessment responsibilities at the graduate-level and entry-level would seem to only exacerbate the skill deficit for professionals in the field by the time they reach mid-level roles and present a substantial challenge in making the transition to a position in which one is responsible for demonstrating student learning.

The conclusions one can draw from the literature presented above are nothing short of paradoxical. On the one hand, the policy context, senior leaders in student affairs, graduate preparation program faculty, and the competency standards of the field itself all strongly voice the importance of developing the skills and knowledge base required to demonstrate student learning outcomes in non-classroom settings. On the other hand, the literature shows that practitioners at the masters and entry levels in student affairs feel underprepared for assessing student learning, find that they spend little time doing so anyhow, and that assessment in general is perceived as an undesirable responsibility in comparison to other elements of one's job. Regrettably, the transition into a mid-level

role within student affairs would seem to bring this paradox to the forefront for individual professionals, asking them to wrestle with a set of job responsibilities that are clearly important and necessary, but at the same time are responsibilities for which they may be woefully unready to fulfill.

Research questions. There are several research questions that were used as the foundation for addressing this problem through this study and informing the methods described in subsequent sections. Definitions of key terms in these questions are provided in the next section of the paper:

(1) How do mid-level student affairs professionals make meaning of and perceive their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes?

(2) Through what structures and processes do mid-level student affairs professionals come to make meaning of (or not make meaning of) responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes?

(3) How does the organization/environment influence the structures and processes of meaning making?

A study seeking to understand these questions cannot explore them as discrete entities. Rather, these questions will and must be explored concurrently. The processes by which and experiences that influence the development of perceptions and meaning inevitably intertwine the individual and their environment, a point that is further articulated in the literature review for the study. The consequence of this is the need to utilize a methodology that accounts for it. The former is done here, while the latter will come later.

Definition of Terms

There are a number of relevant terms that need to be defined before moving ahead. These terms include:

Student Affairs: student affairs is broadly defined by the offices, functional areas, and individuals within colleges and universities that provide programs or services to students, primarily, though not exclusively, in non-classroom settings. The offices and individuals within student affairs vary across organizational structures, however, those areas represented within the professional associations of ACPA, NASPA, or reviewed by CAS standards are widely recognized as those that could fall under the student affairs umbrella. For the purpose of this study, participants work in one of the functional areas in student affairs that is more heavily focused on providing developmental programming to students – career services, residence life, student involvement, leadership education, orientation/first-year experience, fraternity and sorority life, international programs, or multicultural programs.

Mid-Level: the continued expansion of administrative responsibilities on colleges and universities has seen tremendous growth in roles that might be considered mid-level. Consequently, mid-level is itself a relatively ill-defined and shifting concept. Two previous studies attempt to define mid-level student affairs professionals. Fey and Carpenter (1996) defined a mid-level student affairs administrator as "(a) an individual who occupied a position that reported directly to the Chief Student Affairs Administrator or who occupied a position one level removed from the CSSA and (b) was responsible for the direction or control of one or more student affairs functions, or supervision of one

or more professional staff members" (p. 221). Johnsrud and Rosser (1999) wrote, "Midlevel administrators often report to a top-level officer, administrator, dean, or assistant. Their classifications may be administrative, professional, technical, or specialist. Their positions may be differentiated by functional specialization, skills, training, and experience" (p. 121). Neither of these definitions is particularly useful for determining who is and who is not a mid-level student affairs professional. Consequently, drawing loosely from these definitions this study will broadly define mid-level as position that is inherently beyond one's first full-time job, yet is typically below the level of dean and/or vice president. The sampling criteria for the study will offer greater specificity to those eligible for being considered mid-level.

Professional: in the context of this study professional refers to both the individual holding a particular role that meets both the definitions of student affairs and mid-level described above, but also to an aspect of one's identity to be explored by the research questions of the study itself. In this latter sense, Bragg (1976) defined professional identity as the "internalization of the norms of the profession into the individual's self-image…and the acquisition of the specific competence in knowledge and skills, autonomy of judgment, and responsibility and commitment of the profession" (p. 7). Relying upon this definition, assessment of student learning outcomes is both a competency of being a professional in the field of student affairs, but it is also a norm of being a professional in student affairs that may influence an individual's identity. This notion is explored in greater depth in the literature review to follow.

Meaning Making: the concept of meaning making informs a substantial component of this study's literature review and the lens through which its findings will be analyzed, both described in much greater detail in subsequent sections. However, most succinctly, the definition of meaning making for this study draws heavily upon Kegan's (1994) orders of consciousness and his constructive-developmental theory of adult development that has epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions. Baxter Magolda (2008) articulately summarizes this theory stating, "it surfaces the interconnectivity of how we view the world (the epistemological dimension), how we view ourselves (the intrapersonal dimension), and how we view social relations (the interpersonal dimension)" (p. 270). These concepts are explored in greater detail in the literature review in the following chapter.

Responsibilities: for the purposes of this study, responsibilities are understood to be either tacit or explicit expectations required by the fulfillment of one's job. Responsibilities may be written or unwritten, poorly defined or well defined, and they may be consistently or inconsistently understood by individuals connected to their fulfillment. It is worth noting upfront that the responsibilities explored by this study, assessing student learning outcomes, have become highly centralized in student affairs in the last decade (Tull & Kuk, 2012), as the position of assessment director for student affairs divisions has emerged. However, despite the emergence of these division-wide director positions overseeing assessment, this study recognizes that most of the execution of learning outcomes assessment happens by mid-level practitioners within functional areas in student affairs (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010), and not at the division-wide level.

Student Learning Outcomes: while the purpose of this study is not to explore how mid-level student affairs professionals understand or define student learning outcomes, it is necessary to have a definition of student learning outcomes that informs the broad boundaries for examining the assessment responsibilities of participants in the study. This study relies upon the definition of student learning outcomes provided by the National Institution for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) (2012), "the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education" (p. 1).

Assessment Competency: Within the ACPA and NASPA (2010b) student affairs competencies, research, evaluation, and assessment are clustered together. However, as described by the joint-association document itself, part of this competency cluster itself is the ability for professionals to "differentiate among assessment, program review, evaluation, planning, and research and the methodologies appropriate to each" (ACPA & NASPA, 2010b, p. 8) as a "basic" expectation. Additionally, much of the research that is referenced below explores these three practices as if they were one. By comparison, this study focuses explicitly on assessment, and even more specifically on the assessment of student learning outcomes as defined above. While program evaluation and research are certainly important to the work of student affairs professionals, this study does not seek to understand how professionals make meaning of these other practices. The functions involved in executing and building one's assessment competency serve as the focus of the data collected in this study. These functions include practices such as: identifying the goal of assessment; articulating clearing defined learning outcomes; developing tools to

facilitate the collection of data; collecting appropriate data via multiple methods; analyzing and interpreting data, determining and disseminating findings; and making changings to practices based upon findings (Suskie, 2009).

Group/Organizational Environment: the group/organizational environment encompasses multiple elements of the social structure within which individuals and their professional work is situated, including, but not limited to, people, structures, policies, politics, resources, culture, and decision-making (for example, see Bolman & Deal, 2003; Birnbaum, 1988). This study includes an exploration of how individuals interpret the context that their group/organizational environment provides in the meaning making process.

Methodological Overview

While a more robust description of the methodology of this study is provided in a subsequent chapter, a brief overview is provided here in order for the reader to most effectively navigate the literature that will follow. This study is built upon the qualitative research methodology of grounded theory. Participants in the study were interviewed twice. An initial, semi-structured interview occurred at the start of the process. Subsequently, participants each kept an action research diary, serving as another form of data for analysis. Finally, participants were interviewed a second time, reflecting back on the initial interview and their own writings from the action research diary.

This study includes ten participants. No two participants were selected from the same college or university. Participants were currently employed mid-level student affairs professionals at a four-year public college or university. Participants were

purposefully selected to represent a range of functional areas in student affairs. Participants selected pseudonyms as the outset of the data collection process, and these pseudonyms are used to identify them in the final two chapters of the study. The study employed all required and appropriate standards for confidentiality, informed consent, and document storage.

Study Significance and Value

This study has potential significance and value for several reasons. First, as the importance of assessing student learning outcomes in higher education grows, each study that examines a facet of this professional responsibility adds greater depth, breadth, and nuanced understanding to the overall body of literature on the subject. Second, previous studies have largely focused on the perceived competence for assessing student learning outcomes among entry-level student affairs professionals, or the perceived importance for doing so among senior-level professionals and graduate preparation program faculty. The mid-level professional is largely ignored in the literature on the subject, which is striking given the importance of this responsibility at that level. A third and related way in which this study has potential significance is by attempting to shed light on one aspect of the transitional experience from entry-level to mid-level positions within the field of student affairs. Again, this transition is largely ignored by the research, especially with regard to the questions being explored in this study.

Lastly, there is a noticeable gap in the literature on the assessment of student learning outcomes and the experiences of individual practitioners conducting student learning outcomes assessment. Studies that consider how outcomes-based learning

assessment in student affairs happens (does or should) almost always omit the role of the individual practitioner. In taking a macro-level approach to studying outcomes-assessment in student affairs, primarily by considering organizational structures and overarching cultural considerations that allow divisions of student affairs to effectively execute assessment efforts, scholars miss out on the experiences of individual professionals. In effect, this gap privileges by omission traditional assumptions about organizational effectiveness and change, such as senior leadership needing to show support for outcomes-based assessment, or that successful practices cannot happen without positions or committees to oversee them. While these conclusions may be important, they miss a larger piece of the context, namely, the structures and processes of meaning making for individual student affairs professionals with responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes who are not the senior officer or the assessment director for the division. Consequently, this study can address a unique void in multiple conversations in the literature.

Research Positionality

Because the researcher in a qualitative study is the instrument of analysis (Maxwell, 2013), it is important for me to articulate my position and assumptions I held upon entering into this study, speaking directly in the first person. It is important for the reader to know what experiences, assumptions, and biases I brought to the table in the purpose, design, and execution of this study. Being explicit about my role and assumptions is another way to strengthen the worthiness of the study, but also provides the reader with yet another lens through which the study can be interpreted. A number of

a priori assumptions, beliefs, and expectations existed for me in entering into this study and in trying to answer its questions. I did not come to the study as a blank slate with total objectivity because of my own professional experiences and biases. Consequently, it is necessary for me to be explicit about any relevant previous experiences and how they informed my study.

Despite having been a university administrator and student affairs professional for over ten years, I have infrequently been responsible for having to answer the question, "well, how do you know what you do works?" or, "how can you demonstrate the impact of your work?" at least with respect to student learning. The outcomes I generally tried to show in my work were results such as student participation, satisfaction, and degree progress, but learning is much more complicated to assess. It is something that I never had to do in any of my administrative roles (beyond my instructional experiences in the classroom), but it is something that I asked of others (through project teams and with staff).

Four and a half of my ten years of professional experience inside colleges and universities were spent as an administrator within the setting of an academic college. The academic side of the university has no difficulty (practically speaking) being responsible for demonstrating student learning (or so I assume, despite recognizing that what student learning should look like is itself something that is hotly and regularly contested). Faculty and academic administrators recognize that learning needs to be the byproduct of a curricular experience and that such learning needs to be guided by outcomes that can be articulated, both to the individual student, as well as a wide range of internal and external

stakeholders. At the same time, my experience in this role highlighted for me the tension between academic (degree-driven) learning and "other" learning. From my experience, the culture and socialization process on the academic side of the university setting left me wrestling with whether non-academic learning needs to be measured (even the distinction between non-academic and academic learning seems contrived and artificial), and what the role of other parts of the university should be in fostering student learning.

As I moved out of this role and into an administrative position in student affairs, I worked alongside dozens of colleagues who were increasingly asked to demonstrate that their work outside of the classroom contributed to student learning outcomes. A major component of the strategic planning process for the student affairs division of which I was a part, a process that I helped design, involved developing methods by which the division could demonstrate the student learning that occurs outside of the classroom at the university. While doing so was clearly significant for the division's senior leaders, how to make this happen was something that I observed as being a significant source of anxiety for many individuals throughout the division. These observations sparked my own scholarly curiosity and ultimately lead me down a path towards wanting to pursue this particular study.

In conversations with colleagues, I perceived a fair amount of frustration and even resentment about the emerging responsibilities I wanted to study in this project. As a result, I recognized that the sense making process I wanted to focus upon is one that might be filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and at times, hostility. While participants in my study came from different institutional environments, I anticipated finding that they

would have a negative perspective regarding this responsibility and their own process for figuring out how to deal with it.

Among colleagues who are mid-level employees, I observed the greatest anxiety, which prompted me to further focus my participant selection on that level of staff member. In my own experiences making the transition from entry-level jobs into more mid and senior-level roles, negotiating new responsibilities and role ambiguity was a challenge for me, and I expected to see similar themes uncovered in my study. At the same time, I needed to stay open to the possibility that I might be wrong about this assumption, as my observations about anxiety and role ambiguity in demonstrating student learning could have only been the case among those I worked with in the past in my own organization.

Additionally, I often heard from our division's most senior leadership about how the team would need to demonstrate student learning and the outcomes of our work to justify the money we received to fund our co-curricular programs and services for students. This argument suggested that our ability to demonstrate student learning outcomes would drive decisions about allocation of resources, and was a drastic shift in how our part of the university operated to that point in time. As a result, another expectation I had going into the study is that I would find participants talking about responding to pressure from external factors, like stories in the media about how students do not learn anything in college, and how the cost of college is no longer worth it, as well as them recognizing the need to use data to compete for internal funding.

My own personal perspective on this accountability and data-driven decision making movement is that it is unsettling for me as a professional to have the value of my work publicly scrutinized in such a way. However, I also believe that as a former employee of a public university, student affairs administrators need to be accountable for the impact of the tax dollars that support their programs, and that such accountability needs to be transparent to the public. As a result, I have both a negative and a positive orientation to the topic of my project. I believe that it is important, but at the same time, I do not like what is driving its importance (or at least aspects of its importance). The duality I feel towards the topic has influenced both my motivation for pursuing the study and also the expectations I had entering into it.

A final expectation I had going into the study goes back to my previous professional experience as an administrator in academic affairs. I anticipated hearing some resentment among student affairs professionals for having to demonstrate student learning outcomes, and in doing so, living up the standards set forth by the academic side of the institution. To take it a step further, I assumed that student affairs professionals assess student learning outcomes (setting aside for a moment whether or not they are told to do it) not because they believe they should, but because they might feel some inferiority about how their work is as valuable to the student learning process as what happens in the classroom and through the curricular experience. My assumption was that student affair professionals, even if they believe in the importance of demonstrating student learning outcomes, are not motivated by doing so, and frame it as a necessary evil imposed upon them by others who believe that learning needs to be demonstrated both

inside and outside of the classroom. Again, I did not know if this assumption would be evident in this study, but because of my experiences on both sides of the university, and from observing how academic learning is privileged compared to non-academic learning, it is an expectation I need to be explicit about from the outset.

CHAPTER TWO

This study explored the process by which mid-level student affairs professionals at colleges and universities make meaning of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. The intention of the study was to develop a theory that can be used to explain the meaning making process around their assessment competencies and what structures and processes contribute to their meaning making. The literature review for this study draws upon research from an array of disciplines, with meaning making being the primary phenomenon of interest. An exploration of meaning making in the student affairs profession intersects with literature from psychology, management, sociology, education, in addition to studies that have themselves integrated two or more of these disciplines, such as those from organizational psychology, adult developmental theory, or identity development in higher education. Before proceeding with the literature review, a general framing of this chapter is in order.

Using grounded theory, this study seeks to inductively develop theory from empirically collected data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As such, the literature review itself cannot be viewed as a mechanism for imposing *a priori* conclusions before the collection and analysis of data. Consequently, the literature review that follows is meant to illustrate a thorough familiarity with relevant existing studies across multiple disciplines, and that the review itself provides a "contextualization"

(Dunne, 2011, p. 115) for the study. In doing so, the literature review is intended to make the argument for the study, identify gaps in existing theories and research, and provide an initial foundation for how data coding and analysis might occur, all in an effort to "demonstrate how the study builds upon and contributes to extant knowledge within the field" (Dunne, 2011, p. 115). McMenamin (2006) described this approach to a grounded theory literature review as providing a "geography of subject" (p. 134), helping to frame research questions to investigate an area in the literature that has been overlooked. While multiple theories are discussed below, it is with this general framing in mind that they are reviewed, and not with the intention of imposing specific concepts on the data collection that will follow (Charmaz, 2006; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2006). Ultimately, as the constant comparative analysis (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) and memoing unfolds during the execution of the study, additional literature will be consulted and some of what is presented here may be contradicted in the findings and discussion sections that follow.

The literature review is structured in four parts. Literature that frames meaning making as a constructive and developmental process is explored first. Second, literature on meaning making at work will be reviewed. Third, relevant studies examining meaning making among higher education professionals are presented. Lastly, studies exploring assessment competencies among student affairs professionals are considered to tie together literature from the other three sections. The resulting argument and conclusion of the literature review is that existing theories fail to fully explain the meaning making structures and processes that illustrate how mid-level student affairs professionals understand their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes.

Meaning Making as a Constructive and Developmental Process

The concept of meaning making utilized by this study comes from Robert Kegan's (1994) influential work *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Kegan's (1994) focus in this book was to "look at the curriculum of modern life in relation to the capacities of the adult mind," examining expectations of contemporary society and the "demands they make on our minds, on *how* we know, on the complexity of our consciousness" (p. 5). The purpose of this theory was to "enable us to consider the fit, or lack of fit, between the demands our cultural curriculum makes on our consciousness on the one hand, and our mental capacities as 'students' in this ongoing school on the other" (Kegan, 1994, p. 7).

Kegan (1994) distinguished between notions of subject and object to form what he termed orders of consciousness or "order of mind" (p. 23). At any existing order of consciousness, those perceptions, ideas, and beliefs which one holds are considered subject, and the perceptions, ideas, and beliefs beyond the self are considered object. Kegan's (1994) theory in this sense is developmental in that any progression from one order of consciousness to a higher order involves the integration of those perceptions, ideas, and beliefs that were once outside the self into what one holds as object. The meaning making or sense making process results from the transformation of ideas, values, relationships, and emotions from abstract and externally defined, to integrated and internally defined.

Kegan's theory is also constructive (Charmaz, 2006) or constructionist (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) in the sense that "Our understanding of this world is inevitably

our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality, and no such construction can claim absolute truth" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 43). Conceiving of meaning making in this way recognizes a broader epistemological perspective that the process of meaning making as one in which people are actively engaged and "shaped by our assumptions and prior experiences as well as by the reality we interact with" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 43). Kegan (1994) wrote, "I look at people as active organizers of their experience" (p. 29). However, it would be a mistake to view the constructive nature of meaning making as a purely cognitive process. Kegan (1994) acknowledged that the active organization and meaning making of experiences occurs cognitively and socially. Baxter Magolda (2008) succinctly described Kegan's constructive developmental philosophy for meaning making as one that "surfaces the interconnectivity of how we view the world (the epistemological dimension), how we view ourselves (the intrapersonal dimension), and how we view social relations (the interpersonal dimension)" (p. 270).

Summarizing Kegan's (1994) work, Love and Guthrie (1999) articulated five fundamental assumptions of the theory that are worth noting:

> First, the orders of consciousness not only refer to how one thinks but more generally to how to how one constructs experience, which includes thinking, feeling, and relating to others. Second, Kegan's orders concern the organization of one's thinking, feeling, and social relating rather than the content. Third, each order of consciousness is constituted by a different subject-object relationship. Kegan's fourth assumption is that the orders of consciousness are related to each

> other. One does not simply replace the other; rather, each successive principle subsumes the prior principle. Thus, the new order is higher, more complex, and more inclusive. Finally, what is taken as subject and object is not fixed: what was subject at one order becomes object at the next order. (p. 67)

A definition of meaning making built upon these theoretical concepts and assumptions is relevant to this study in several ways. First, understanding meaning making as a constructive process necessitates exploring that process as one in which individuals have agency, but also exist in a large social context beyond themselves. Meaning making is an active and interactive process between the individuals and their social context, requiring that an exploration of it account for the role of the individual, the role of the social context, and the ongoing interaction that sits in between. Second, viewing meaning making as a developmental process necessitates a recognition that the process occurs over time, although not inherently in a linear fashion. As a developmental concept, this study views meaning making as a process where individuals exist at a particular knowledge structure at a given point in time, but where demands, expectations, and other factors in one's life present potential challenges to that order. Thus, meaning making can result in either stagnation or growth, ultimately depending upon the extent to which one's complexity of consciousness allows for meeting (or not meeting) the demands of one's mental curriculum (Kegan, 1994).

Self-authorship as a meaning making process. This theory of meaning making has played a significant role in the higher education literature, contributing substantially to the work on self-authorship and identity development. Self-authorship, typically

associated with Kegan's fourth order of consciousness (Berger, 2012; Love & Guthrie, 1999), is "characterized by internally generating and coordinating one's beliefs, values, and internal loyalties rather than depending on external values, beliefs, and interpersonal loyalties" (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010, p. 3). Self-authorship is a constructive or constructionist concept because it is "based on the premise that people create knowledge through interpreting their experience, rather than knowledge being an objective truth that exists outside the individual" (Boes et al., 2010, p. 4). Similarly, self-authorship is a developmental concept, as "it focuses not on *what* we know – the content of our thinking – but on the complexity, underlying structure, and pattern of meaning-making, or *how* we know" (Boes et al., 2010, p. 4). This study focuses on this same "how" of meaning making for mid-level student affairs professionals and their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes.

From her longitudinal study of adults in their 30s, Baxter Magolda (2008) specified that the process of reaching the self-authored order of consciousness has three components – trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments. Trusting the internal voice refers to individuals who "recognized that reality, or what happened in the world and their lives, was beyond their control, but their reactions to what happened was within their control. Trusting their internal voices heightened their ability to take ownership of how they made meaning of external events" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 279). Building an internal foundation involved individuals working "to refine their personal, internal authority in determining their beliefs, identity, and relationships. They reflected on how they had organized themselves and their lives

and rearranged as necessary to align arenas of their lives with their internal voices" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280). Finally, securing internal commitments is, "When the internal foundation became the enduring core of their being, participants felt that living their convictions was as natural and as necessary as breathing" (p. 281). Consequently, as a constructive and developmental meaning making process, attaining self-authorship involves developing an internal voice to guide decision making, using that voice to build a belief system, and strengthening the system to become one's core foundation for existence (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Regarding this study, uncovering those elements of one's experience that lead to the development of the internal voice with respect to assessing student learning outcomes would be of great significance, as existing studies on assessment responsibilities among student affairs professionals have largely ignored the voices of individual practitioners and what processes and structures contribute to their voices.

However, this theory also varies according to one's life and work contexts (Boes et al., 2010). Kegan (1994) described these contexts as holding environments, which influence the level of challenge and support available in the meaning making process (Boes et al., 2010). In addition to life and work contexts being understood as holding environments within which meaning making occurs, the self-authorship framework raises the idea of a "crossroads" as "the transitional space between relying upon external formulas and achieving self-authorship" (Boes et al., 2010, p. 12). Berger (2004) referred to this same concept as the "edge of knowing" (p. 338), recognizing that individuals in this process exist along "a complex continuum that ranges from those who seek out and

enjoy transformation to those who are in anguish while at the edges of their understanding" (p. 344). When at the crossroads or the edge of knowing, individuals often have "a tendency to take responsibility for others' expectations and feel guilty when they do not meet them. Recognizing this tendency and seeing an alternative way to frame others' expectations is crucial to movement out of the crossroads into self-authoring" (Boes et al., 2010, p. 13). The concepts of holding environments and the crossroads that are a part of these theories of meaning making and self-authorship further illustrate its contextual, constructive, and developmental nature. This study offers a snapshot into the contextual, constructive, and developmental nature of meaning making of a complex job responsibility.

Additionally, King (2010) argued that the cognitive dimension of self-authorship, although not inherently more important than the intrapersonal or interpersonal dimensions, is likely to be the most visible to the researcher. She wrote:

> Cognitive complexity seems to undergird intrapersonal and interpersonal development: without cognitive complexity, one does not have a cognitive frame of reference that would accommodate integrating several aspects of self or seeing multiple possibilities and choices about the kinds of friendships one constructs. (King, 2010, p. 179)

While the meaning making process is presented as both cognitive and social in nature, King's (2010) findings illustrated that the cognitive aspect of meaning making inherently needs to exist to frame and make sense of social and interpersonal experiences. This finding is significant for this study, as it points to the unique challenge for a researcher in

teasing out meaning making experiences beyond the cognitive dimension when collecting data from participants.

Baxter Magolda (2010), however, reached a slightly different conclusion, finding that "participants had a default, or 'home' dimension that was used in the foreground of how they constructed their lives" (p. 41). In reflecting on their experiences, some participants took an approach that was more epistemological or cognitive in nature, choosing to explore how they know what they know. Yet other self-reflective participants privileged intrapersonal meaning making, choosing to explore who they are, and still other participants who were highly relational focused on interpersonal meaning making around the relationships that they wanted (Baxter Magolda, 2010). This finding suggests that individuals may unconsciously privilege a particular dimension of meaning making in the self-authorship process that acts as a primary mechanism through which all three dimensions are concurrently explored. At the same time, Baxter Magolda (2010) found that the epistemological/cognitive dimension of self-authorship most often prompted thinking in the other two dimensions – "in other words, convictions were in their heads before they could live them in their hearts. This implies that the epistemological dimension is necessary to process beliefs about self and relationship" (Baxter Magolda, 2010, p. 42), giving further support to King's (2010) conclusions.

Despite these two findings suggesting that the cognitive dimension of self-authorship is somewhat more significant than the two dimensions that are more relational in nature, other scholars argue that studies of self-authorship and meaning making in higher education cannot be divorced from the social context in which they take place

(Greeno, 1998; Pizzolato, 2010). Although the cognitive dimension of the meaning making process may be the strongest dimension, the theory of situated cognition helps to frame the role of the environment on the cognitive aspects of meaning making. Pizzolato (2010) wrote, "Situated cognition asserts that meaning-making occurs through social interaction with people and the environment. How people think is complex, individual, and yet inextricably bound by the opportunities and values presented in social interaction" (p. 197). Similarly, Greeno (1998) argued that researchers need to shift their focus from studying "behavior of individuals to behavior of systems in which individuals participate" (p. 13). This notion of situated cognition highlights the need to construct studies that explore meaning making with an eye towards the situation and environment within which meaning making occurs, even if the nature of meaning making for the individual is itself a more internal and cognitive process. Collectively, these findings inform the methodology and data collection procedures for this study described in the following chapter.

Several studies have examined self-authorship and Kegan's (1994) orders of consciousness in considering the development of multiple identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2009; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). The initial study to make the connection between self-authorship and multiple dimensions of identity development was a grounded theory study involving college women ages 20-24. Findings included a core sense of self/personal identity that was constantly interacting with other salient identities, which were more or less prevalent for an individual depending upon the context and their interaction with their environment

(Jones & McEwen, 2000). Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) took this a step further, adding the construct of a meaning making filter. The authors described the filter and its meaning making role in the multiple identity development process, stating:

> How contextual influences move through the filter depends on the depth and permeability of the filter. The depth (thickness) and permeability (size of openings) of the filter depend upon the complexity of the person's meaning-making capacity. To illustrate complex meaning making, the filter would be drawn with increased depth and smaller grid openings; less complex meaning-making capacity would be illustrated through a narrower filter with wider grid openings. (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007, p. 6)

Essentially, these authors suggest that a more complex meaning making filter would be an extension of an individual's movement towards self-authorship, in which an individual would be able to identify, understand, and integrate multiple aspects of their identity across shifting environments and contexts (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). This concept of a meaning making filter and its role in the multiple identity development process has substantial applicability for this study. In a sense, this study is examining what structures and processes contribute to a meaning making filter for the study's participants, serving as a lens through which the specific job responsibility of assessing student learning outcomes is framed. As an extension of the research questions for this study, articulating an understanding how student affairs professionals use a meaning making filter and what processes and structures influence that meaning making filter is a possible insight that will be discussed later.

Socialization as a meaning making process. While the theories of meaning making and self-authorship discussed above account for the unique role of culture and the environment, the theory of organizational socialization offers a complementary set of concepts for further considering the ways in which the individual and the organization intersect in the meaning making process. Socialization is understood as both a process and an outcome, when various influences of the organization impact an individual's acculturation (or lack thereof) (Maitlis, 2005; Schein, 1971; Thornston & Nardi, 1975; Van Maanen, 1978; Weick, 1993). Schein (1971) described:

> The long and complex process of socialization teaches us the various norms, rules of conduct, values and attitudes, and desirable role behaviors through which one's obligations in situations and roles can be fulfilled. All of these patterns become part of us, so that to a large extent we are not conscious of the almost instantaneous 'choices' we make among possible patters as we 'compose ourselves' for entry into a new social situation. Yet these patterns can be immediately brought to consciousness if the presented self chosen is one which does not fit the situation, that is, fails to get confirmation from others. (p. 411)

This quotation illustrates socialization as both a process and an outcome. It is a process of learning norms, values, attitudes, and desirable behaviors in the context of one's environment. It is an outcome to the extent to which these norms, values, attitudes, and desirable behaviors are truly learned and integrated into one's decision-making and choices. Expanding on these concepts, Schein (1971) argued, that as an individual "faces new roles which bring new demands, it is from his repertoire of attributes and skills that

he constructs or reconstructs himself to meet these demands" (p. 412). In many ways, this mirrors the frameworks from Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2008) described above, but in a manner that uniquely elevates the context and the organization in the meaning making process.

Some scholars frame socialization in a manner that prescribes a particular approach or ideal outcome. Thornston and Nardi (1975) argued that socialization to a particular role is a process that is both psychological and social, reflecting back to the theories of Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2008). However, their theory of role socialization is a process through which an individual passes through four stages – anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal – in order to have successfully "acquired" (p. 870) a particular role. Similarly, Maitlis (2005) developed four forms in a study exploring the degrees to which stakeholders and leaders attempt to influence the understanding of others within their organization – guided, fragmented, restricted, and minimal (p. 21). In this model, the preferred form of socialization and sensemaking would be guided, as it results in an outcome where high levels of sense giving produce a common understanding that is rich and leads to a series of actions that are consistent over time (Maitlis, 2005). These theories of socialization connect to the theories of meaning making described above because all are constructive, developmental, and recognize that the process of meaning making occurs at the intersection of individuals and their environment. While Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2008) may slightly elevate the cognitive and individual aspect of meaning making, socialization gives greater emphasis to the importance of others and the environment as structures contributing to the meaning

making process (Maitlis, 2005; Thornston & Nardi, 1975; Van Maanen, 1978). Consequently, for this study, socialization theories and related literature described below demonstrate the necessity of collecting data about the organizational and environmental influences experienced by the individual in order to have a holistic perspective of the structures and processes of meaning making.

While Thornston and Nardi (1975) and Maitlis (2005) argued that socialization has a preferred endpoint or strategy, by comparison, Van Maanen (1978) viewed socialization as occurring along seven dichotomies – formal/informal, individual/collective, sequential/nonsequential, fixed/variable, tournament/contest, serial/disjunctive, and investiture/divestiture. From this perspective, socialization takes different shapes and forms across organizational settings, without a privileged destination or process (Van Maanen, 1978). Similarly, Weick (1993), instead of focusing on an ideal strategy or outcome from the socialization process, suggested four sources for addressing organizational dysfunction that may hinder the socialization process – improvisation, virtual role systems, the attitude of wisdom, and norms of respectful interaction (p. 628). In this sense, socialization is neither good nor bad, but is simply an inevitable aspect of organizational life in which the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of the individual intersect in one or more ways with the same set of characteristics of the organization and the organizational environment.

The relevance of the theories of organizational socialization for this study rest upon their recognition that structures and processes outside the individual can influence the individual's meaning making process. From this perspective, socialization is in some

ways similar to the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of self-authorship. Like the theory of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008), these theories of socialization consider not just what an individual comes to know, but how that knowledge comes to be, focusing more purposefully on external contributors that impact the holding environments (Boes et al., 2010) of meaning making. By comparison, socialization elevates the importance of others and the environment in the meaning making process, highlighting the influences of the organization in shaping how one views one's self (interpersonal) and how one views one's relationships with others (intrapersonal). While meaning making may occur primarily at the cognitive level (Baxter Magolda, 2010; King, 2010), it is incumbent upon the researcher to acknowledge and account for the influence of the relational context in which the individual exists (Greeno, 1998; Pizzolato, 2010). Consequently, theories of organizational socialization play an important role in framing this study, contributing another set of perspectives on meaning making and what data must be collected in order to fully explore the meaning making process.

Meaning Making at Work

The previous sections of this literature review articulated the interconnected theories of meaning making, self-authorship, and socialization. This component of the literature review examines how these and related theories have been applied to studies of meaning making at work. Examining more than 30 years of literature, primarily from organizational behavior and management, Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) performed a meta-analysis on the existing body of knowledge on meaning making at work and created a model illustrating that meaning making occurs along two intersecting

pathways – self/other and agency/communion. The analysis that follows begins by reviewing this self/other and agency/communion pathways model, after which other relevant studies on meaning making at work will be explored.

The meta-analysis from Rosso et al. (2010) synthesized hundreds of different papers from organizational psychology and management related to the broader subject of meaning making at work. Consequently, their analysis and the resulting model will be examined in significant detail in this section. In their review of the studies on meaning at work, the authors found, "in a basic sense they all explicitly or implicitly weigh in on two key issues: where the meaning of work comes from (i.e., the sources of meaning), and how it is that work becomes meaningful (i.e., the underlying psychological and social mechanisms)" (p. 93). They also recognized, similar to the synthesis above, that "the literature on the meaning of work within the field of organizational behavior has primarily employed a psychological perspective, presuming that perceptions of meaning are rooted in individuals' subjective interpretations of work experiences and interactions," while, "In contrast, a sociological perspective on meaning presumes that individuals ascribe meaning to things or come to see certain aspects of their lives as more or less meaningful in ways that reflect culturally influenced worldviews and value systems" (p. 94).

Sources of meaning at work. Examining the literature that studied the sources from which the meaning of work emanates, Rosso et al., (2010) identified four main areas – "the self, other persons, the work context, and spiritual life" (p. 95). Literature exploring the role of the self as a source of meaning at work is further subdivided into the

areas of values, motivations, and beliefs about work. Referencing Locke and Taylor (1990), Rosso et al., stated, "a cyclical process whereby values influence occupational choices, and the experiences of work in those occupations reinforce those values" (2010, p. 96) as one example for how values of the self are a source of meaning at work. Motivation as a component of the self and as a source of meaning at work is described along a continuum of intrinsic to extrinsic motivation, with "the most internally driven form of motivation being intrinsic" (p. 97). Lastly, literature on beliefs as an aspect of the self and as a source of meaning at work is examined through three concepts – job involvement and the centrality of work in one's life, work orientation, and callings. Tying this literature together, the authors ultimately argued, "how individuals see themselves and how they are oriented toward the activity of work play a crucial role in the meaning of this work" (p. 99). Hence, in the data collection, it is imperative to inquire about how participants see themselves at work.

The second source of meaning at work explored in this meta-analysis is other persons, subdivided into four areas – coworkers, leaders, groups and communities, and families (Rosso et al., 2010). Referencing Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) and social information processing theory, Rosso et al., argued, "employees look to others in the workplace for cues about how to think and behave, and draw from these cues in constructing their own attitudes, interpretations, and meanings of work" (2010, p. 100) to describe the influence of coworkers as a source of meaning. Groups and communities are sources of meaning because they contribute to the social identity of those around them (Rosso et al., 2010). At the same time, as the authors acknowledged, "some individuals

can be more salient or significant [sources of meaning] than others in a given context" (p. 102). Cues and their sources received at work about assessing student learning outcomes are another important piece of data to gather and analyze in this study.

The third source of meaning at work identified in the literature in this meta-analysis was the work context, broken down into five categories – "design of job tasks, organizational mission, financial circumstances, non-work domains, and the national culture in which the work is conducted" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 103). One paper reviewed in this area of potential relevance to this study found, "work designed to promote a sense of purpose and positive impact on others contributes to a greater perceived task significance, and thus, more meaningfulness" (p. 103). Consequently, the extent that student affairs professionals view their work as having a purpose and positive impact on others may contribute to the process by which they make meaning of it and make meaning of themselves. Spiritual life, broken into spirituality and sacred calling to a particular vocation, represent the fourth and final source of work identified by the authors in their meta-analysis (Rosso et al., 2010).

Mechanisms of meaning at work. Having classified and reviewed the four sources from which workers derive meaning from work, the authors proceeded to examine what they deemed to be mechanisms of meaning, "the underlying engine driving a relationship between two variables, capturing the process through which one variable influences another" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 108). In this sense, the meaning of work is an outcome variable, and the authors identified seven other variables from the literature recognized as contributing to how work is perceived as meaningful or acquires meaning.

These variables are “authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence, and cultural and interpersonal sensemaking” (p. 108). The mechanism of authenticity is understood to include factors contributing to the “enactment or development of the ‘true’ self” (p. 108). Self-efficacy is defined as “individuals’ beliefs that they have power and ability to produce an intended effect or to make a difference” through their work (p. 109). By contrast, self-esteem as a mechanism of meaning of work is grounded in “a sense of oneself as worthwhile” (p. 110).

The authors defined studies exploring purpose as those examining “a sense of directedness and intentionality in life” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 110). Studies looking at belongingness as a mechanism of meaning at work examined “identification with, and feelings of connections to social groups” (p. 111). Transcendence, a sixth and relatively unexplored mechanism of meaning at work examined ways in which experiences allow individuals to subordinate themselves to the group or world around them (Rosso et al., 2010). Lastly, cultural and interpersonal sensemaking as a mechanism of meaning at work was defined as those studies examining the sociocultural forces that influence meaning making at work (Rosso et al., 2010). The authors pointed out this final mechanism as being unique, in that “while other mechanisms are rooted primarily in self-based explanations, the cultural and interpersonal sensemaking mechanism emphasizes the role of the social environment in understanding how meaning and meaningfulness are constructed” (p. 113).

After an exhaustive review and classification of literature into four sources of meaning at work and seven mechanisms through which meaning at work is derived, the

authors present their pathways model. The first pathway, agency/communion, was constructed through the observation that the sources of and mechanisms of meaning at work "differed with respect to the types of motives underlying them" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 113). On the one hand, the literature suggested that individuals desire a sense for agency as motivation that influenced the formation of meaning at work, while on the other hand, individuals also yearn for communion with others. The authors argued, "that the activities driven by the pursuit of agency versus communion may have fundamentally distinct influences on the experience of meaningful work" (p. 114), and consequently, need to be examined as unique aspects of any conceptual framework looking to explore the meaning making process. The authors identified the second pathway, self/others, by synthesizing the ways in which the sources and mechanisms of meaning are directed (Rosso et al., 2010).

The intersection of these two pathways for understanding the development of meaning at work, one driven by motivation and one driven by direction, form a four-quadrant scheme into which the different sources and mechanisms of meaning can be examined individually and in relationship to one another. The authors label the quadrants as individuation (self-agency), contribution (other-agency), self-connection (self-communion), and unification (other-communion) (Rosso et al., 2010). The paper of Rosso et al., (2010) summarized the usefulness and potential application of the model, stating:

> The four key pathways to meaningful work offered here may have additive or interactive effects. That is not to say that all pathways must be experienced

> simultaneously, or even that they can be. Indeed, these are important questions for future empirical research. We do propose, however, that for work as a whole to be perceived as meaningful, it is important that there be sufficient opportunities to experience or enact some or all of these four pathways through work. (p. 115)

While it is impossible to predict the relevancy of this model for this study, it is worth briefly illustrating one possible example of how this model and the meta-analysis from which it is created could have implications for this research. In considering the meaning making structures and processes for mid-level student affairs professionals and their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes, this model could suggest that participants in the study are motivated to successfully meet their assessment responsibilities due to intrinsic factors tied to their identity, beliefs, and values, but also due to external socialization forces in their environment. Having presented this model for understanding meaning making at work, additional literature from organizational behavior and management that contributes to the study will be analyzed in the following section.

Additional literature on meaning making at work. In addition to the meaning making at work meta-analysis reviewed above, it is necessary to consider other literature that may inform this study. A group of management scholars have examined the meaning making and identity development processes among other professional groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Berger, 2012; Brown & Lewis, 2011; Collinson, 2003; Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Gini, 1998; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Ibarra, 1999; Kegan & Lehay, 2001; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Swann Jr., Johnson, & Bosson, 2009;

Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2011). Articulated most succinctly by Gini (1998), "work is one of the primary means by which adults find their identity and form their character. Simply put: *where* we work, *how* we work, *what* we do at work and the general ethos and culture of the workplace indelibly mark us for life" (p. 708). In a contemporary fast-paced work environment, organizational scholarship on identity development has recognized the need to understand the processes by which multiple identities are reconciled over time through the interaction between the individual and their environment (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Hall & Mirvis, 1995).

For example, Brown and Lewis (2011) examined how lawyers make sense of their time keeping and billing routines, exploring how identities are constructed through talking about organizational routines as "a normalizing technique that subjugated lawyers by rendering them subject to processes of comparison and correction, and as such was equivalent to other recognized disciplinary techniques such as dress codes and timetables" (Brown & Lewis, 2011, p. 880). This study also resulted in "an understanding of disciplined agency as fluid and generative, in which professionals are recognized as able to confront and reflect on their identity performances, discern tensions, and subtly shift meanings and understandings" (p. 886). This finding connects back to the model reviewed above, as the search for individual agency comingles with others and the context within which the search occurs. In conclusion, Brown and Lewis (2011) argued that, "There is also the need for research on other professional knowledge workers, such as software developers, doctors, engineers and architects, which questions fundamentally

views of them as largely independent and autonomous, and focuses instead on how their conceptions of self are marshaled and policed" (p. 887). This conclusion further supports the intention behind and significance of this study. While student affairs professionals may be highly autonomous and independent in the execution of their work, the structures and processes that influences how they make meaning of the work, especially with respect to assessing student learning outcomes for those in mid-level positions, remains unexplored. As Brown and Lewis (2011) pointed out, even professional knowledge workers, which student affairs professionals could be considered, are likely to be challenged to make sense of and synthesize multiple competing influences that occur at the intersection of the self and the environment.

Adding to the conversation, Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann (2006) studied how medical residents customized their professional identities, finding that "identity construction was triggered by work-identity integrity violations: an experienced mismatch between what physicians did and who they were" (p. 235). The authors found that the perceived violations of their professional identities were "resolved through identity customization processes, which were part of interrelated identity and work learning cycles" (p. 235). These findings connect to the previously discussed meta-analysis model for studying meaning making at work, tying together internal and external forces and processes shaping the professional identity development of medical residents, and recognizing the challenge of aligning internal motivations and values with norms and practices from the organizational socialization process. Moreover, this study ties back to the notion of a meaning making filter (Abes et al, 2007) by highlighting, at least for one

professional population (medical residents), how the integration of one's role can be a meaningful aspect of the process of one's multiple identity development. Furthermore, the contribution of work-identity integrity violations towards customizing one's professional identity found by Pratt el al. (2006) seems to mirror the notions of the "crossroads" (Boes et al, 2010) and the "edge of knowing" (Berger, 2004) referenced earlier. While such a conclusion would obviously need to emerge from the data, it could be possible that the practice of assessing student learning outcomes is in some way a violation of one's professional identity may need to be reconciled through an identity customization process as described by Pratt et al. (2006).

Ibarra (1999) used grounded theory to examine the process of role adaptation of junior investment bankers who were transitioning into more senior positions. The key finding from this study is the notion of provisional selves, described as, "how people adapt to new roles by experimenting with provisional selves that serve as trials for possible but not yet fully elaborated professional identities" (p. 764). The components of development and testing one's provisional selves involved three components: observing role models to identity potential identity prototypes, experimenting with provisional selves, and evaluating experiments against internal standards and external feedback (Ibarra, 1999). The participants in this research actively used and enacted internal and external feedback to evaluate their experimentations with provisional selves in order to "make corrective adjustments to their action strategies so they could eventually reduce discrepancies among their private self-conceptions, the behaviors that define a successful role performance, and the images they project in public as they perform the role" (p.

779). While these components were not all experienced uniformly by all participants in the study, nor did they occur in a consistently linear manner, the concept and process of experimenting with provisional selves is consistent with the meta-analysis findings articulated in the previous section.

In addition to these three studies, several other conceptually driven articles make relevant contributions to the discourse on meaning making at work. For example, Collinson (2003) took a post-structuralist approach to understanding identity development in the workplace. In doing so, Collinson (2003) argued that inevitable power mechanisms within social organizations have the potential to produce mechanisms of conformity and control, as "individuals tend to be preoccupied with themselves as valued objects in the eyes of those in authority" (p. 536). This argument is a meaningful one and connects back to the work of Rosso et al. (2010), showing that the influence of some actors in team or organizational settings may exert stronger influences on the meaning making at work process. Collinson (2003) is articulating that those in positions of authority are more likely to have greater influence because of inevitable power dynamics existing within any social structure. This suggests that the role of "others" in the self/others and agency/communion pathways model cannot divorce the contribution of "others" in the meaning making process from status, power, and authority that individuals or groups may hold. Put another way, the contribution of "others" to the meaning making process is not value-neutral, nor should one assume that "others" contribute equally, as the directionality meaning making may inevitably privilege those with greater levels of power within a given social context.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) applied social identity theory to organizational life, examining its contribution to an understanding of socialization, role conflict, and intergroup relations at work. They argued that the social identity theory literature suggests that individuals "may engender internalization of, and adherence to, group values and norms and homogeneity in attitudes and behaviors" (1989, p. 26). Although role conflict that may occur through the development of one's social identity could be considered a vehicle through which cognitive complexity and meaning making can occur, it should yet again be recognized that socialization mechanisms inherently promote group values and norms, which themselves act as a manifestation of power in the organization. In this sense, the identity development and meaning making process in the workplace can be understood as a "negotiation" between the individual and the roles expected of them by others in their environment (Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009).

Others argue that organizational "cues" contribute substantially to this negotiation process of forming one's social identity in the workplace (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). Cues influence the meaning making process at work first by being noticed or observed, then by being discerned as affirmative or inappropriate, and finally by the act of doing work itself (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). In this sense, "the impact of employees' motivated processing and interpretation of cues on the outcome of the sensemaking process cannot be underemphasized, for it shapes their understanding of their work context and their place in it, but also acts as a guide for their future behavior in interactions with others" (p. 111). Connecting this argument back to the meta-analysis from above, individuals notice organizational cues both out of a desire to achieve agency

and a desire to achieve communion. Moreover, the feedback they interpret by noticing cues as either positive or negative contributes to the socialization process by directing their sensemaking towards others in their environment, if one assumes that cues perceived as positive shape future behavior and cues perceived as negative restrict it. This offers more credence to the importance of cues and the purposeful collection of data in this study about cues to illustrate their potential influence on the processes and structures of meaning making for participants, as well as the influence of cues as an aspect of the environment within which an individual works.

Meaning Making in Higher Education

Having reviewed the theories of meaning making, self-authorship, and socialization, as well as the meaning making at work literature, this section of the literature review turns to studies that have applied these theories in relevant ways to higher education. The first subsection explores general studies that have investigated meaning making in among any type of college-level practitioner. The second subsection reviews the literature on socialization, specifically among student affairs professionals. The final subsection examines other related studies on mid-level student affairs professionals that do not fit into the other two sections of this portion of the literature review.

Meaning making among college professionals. In limited ways, meaning making theories have influenced research into experiences of college level professionals of various types (Cutler, 2003; Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008; Kreber, 2010; Landreman, Rasmussen, King, & Jiang, 2007; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Reybold, 2003;

Smith & Rodgers, 2005; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). A recent meta-analysis of articles on professional identity development in higher education defined this process as "a way of being and a lens to evaluate, learn, and make sense of practice (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012, p. 374). This same paper recognized that a wide array of theoretical foundations have been used to examine a range of different processes that impact professional identity development (Trede et al., 2012), but for the most part are consistent with the theoretical concepts and frameworks discussed above. For example, Renn and Hodges (2007) used Kegan (1994) to frame their study of 10 first-year student affairs professionals and their first year as a full-time professional in the field, concluding, "these new professionals had found their confidence and their voices. They were able to distinguish subject and object in terms of self and job; professional identity could be separated from professional competence" (p. 383). While this study focused on first-year student affairs professionals, its findings that confidence and voice contributed to professional identity development may be relevant for this study, as fundamentally, mid-level student affairs professionals may not be developing their competency or confidence for assessing student learning outcomes until they advance past entry-level positions (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010). Consequently, the meaning making process by which confidence and voice was established at the entry-level may occur as professionals wrestle with new roles and responsibilities at the mid-level.

Several studies (Kreber, 2010; Reybold, 2003) have examined identity development and meaning making among faculty members. Kreber (2010) looked at the possible connection between teaching identities and instructional pedagogy, concluding,

"Academics' personal theories of teaching, in particular the conceptions they hold of learners, are revealed as critical to the extent to which their pedagogies are 'authentic'; the latter, ideally, offering contexts within which students are supported in developing *their* authenticity" (p. 171). A relevant finding from this paper suggests:

> All the academics interviewed for this study commented on the increasing complexity of their workplace due to pressures associated with heightened accountability, and growing levels of administrative tasks. At the same time, there was a commitment to conventional academic values, such as inspiring curiosity and intellectual autonomy in students by involving them in dialogue around important ideas; yet we also saw that many considered this a possibility only in the later years. (Kreber, 2010, p. 192)

Put another way, the responsibility for faculty members to assess student learning outcomes is an extension of the pressure from heightened accountability and was perceived as creating tension with other values held by faculty members as core components of their identity (Kreber, 2010).

Reybold (2003) studied 30 doctoral students at 14 different colleges and universities to explore their transitions into faculty roles and responsibilities. Her study identified five archetypes for describing this transitional experience – anointed, pilgrim, visionary, philosopher, and drifter (Reybold, 2003). The anointed path is characterized by a formal apprenticeship and inside track to success in the academy. The pilgrim path is a carefully planned and strategic journey of accumulating specific necessary academic experiences. Those called to a higher goal to be accomplished through a faculty role

pursue the visionary path. The philosopher pursues the faculty role out of a quest for intellectual growth and enlightenment. Finally, the drifter is not solely committed to academe – they may desire exploring other non-academic avenues as a result of the doctoral degree not being a specific bridge to an intended destination or social cause. Like Kreber's (2010) study, Reybold's (2003) work highlights the unique ways in which values, goals, and experiences intersect in the meaning making process of college-level faculty members. While both studies focused on college-level faculty members, it is possible that that the findings could be extrapolated to illustrate the impact of accountability in higher education on a larger array of college-level professionals, including those in student affairs. The tension described in both studies between core values, professional identity, and accountability pressures is one that may also emerge in this study.

Other studies have explored specific outcomes in the meaning making and identity development processes among college-level educators (Landreman et al., 2007; Smith & Rodgers, 2005). One study involved 20 different university administrators and explored how they developed their multicultural expertise and the experiences that facilitated their visions of social justice, described by the authors as a "process of coming to critical consciousness" (Landreman et al., 2007, p. 277). This study and its findings draw heavily and explicitly among the frameworks of Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2008). The resulting model from (Landreman et al., 2007) has two phases – awareness raising, including exposure to diversity, a critical incident, and self-reflection, with a second phase of social justice action and intergroup relations, culminating in critical

consciousness. The authors summarized their findings by stating, "it was the occurrence of one or more critical incidents, combined with reflection on the significance and importance of these events, that lead to the revelations or crystallizations of meaning referred to as aha moments. Further exposure, critical incidents, and reflection resulted in continued meaning making" (p. 292). The notion of "critical incidents," those that are highly influential in the process and outcomes of meaning making and identity development, may be loosely connected to the ideas of holding environments and the crossroads discussed in a previous section. Put another way, reflection upon critical incidents may be required for passing through the crossroads. This finding suggests that this study include an opportunity for participants to reflect upon critical incidents related to their student learning outcomes assessment experiences in order to surface relevant data about their meaning making.

Smith and Rodgers (2005) studied how 36 student affairs professionals, three faculty members, and the university president at one comprehensive public university in the South understood and utilized the Student Learning Imperative and Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs to design and guide efforts within the institution's student affairs division. The authors argued, "while some individuals and some departments were committed to and used a student learning approach to practice as their primary commitment, others saw a student learning approach as a secondary mission. Secondly, it was difficult for many of the staff to translate their espoused student learning approach into a coherent and theory-based set of practices regardless of whether student learning was a primary or secondary mission," (p. 481). This finding is highly relevant

for this study, as it shows that even among student affairs professionals for whom facilitating student learning is a primary mission, it may be difficult for such individuals to articulate how that mission impacts and is integrated into their identity and professionals practices. Additionally, looking at the professional development efforts for staff in this student affairs division, the study found, "most staff members did not learn and internalize theories and research needed to inform a student learning practice" (p. 485). This finding connects to the Landreman et al. (2007) study referenced above, suggesting that simple exposure to theories of student learning in professional development experiences may not be sufficient for student affairs professionals to internalize and integrate such theories into their identities and practices without the opportunity for ongoing critical reflection and feedback.

Similarly, Helsing et al., (2008) used a case study approach to explore one professional development program designed to provide an opportunity for educators to make "qualitative shifts in the way they understand themselves and their work" (p. 437). Like the study from Smith and Rodgers (2005), this paper concluded, "For changes in practice to occur, educators have to know how and when to use new ideas and what specific behavioral changes are needed. They must practice new ways of acting, receive feedback on these new ways of acting, and be able to experiment further until they become skilled in the new behaviors" (Helsing et al., 2008, p. 458). This study looks to extend this exploration by examining the constructive and developmental meaning making process around a specific job responsibility among a particular set of participants.

Taken together, these studies suggest that professional development opportunities may not be sufficient to spark the "critical" or "provocative" incidents necessary to foster greater levels of meaning making and identity development for higher education professionals. Cutler (2003) reached a similar conclusion in a study of eight entry-level student affairs professionals, finding that participants wanted more formalized and systematic feedback asking them to intentionally link theory to practice as an aspect of their professional identity development processes. Put another way, participating in professional development programs designed to build competencies for assessing student learning outcomes may be ineffective unless they are tied to an opportunity for professionals to receive and reflect upon feedback about their experiences and how those experiences intersect with broader meaning making and identity development processes (Roberts, 2007).

Socialization and student affairs professionals. Several studies have applied the theories of organizational socialization to student affairs professionals (Bureau, 2011; Cotner-Klinger, 2013; Tull & Medrano, 2008; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001; Wilson, Liddell, Hirschy, Pasquesi, & Boyle, 2013). Bureau (2011) looked at four aspects of socialization for 17 student affairs master's program participants – perceptions of essential student affairs values, the extent to which perceptions aligned with literature on student affairs values, how perceptions differ across functional area, and socialization agents and processes that influenced views of values and their enactment. Tull and Medrano (2008) also explored the role of values in student affairs and the extent to which those values were socialized through a given position, finding that across all institutional

types, honesty, openness, and trustworthiness were the most identified character values with which student affairs professionals identified. However, noticeably absent from both studies is the extent to which the value of assessment in student affairs was something to which participants were socialized. That neither study considered the practice of assessing student learning as an essential value in socialization into the field of student affairs further strengthens the relevance and significance of this study.

Similarly, values congruence, or the connection between one's personal values and one's job responsibilities, may be an important factor in determining the extent to which an individual holds a commitment to a career in the field of student affairs as an aspect of their professional identity, particularly for the mid-level professionals (Wilson et al., 2013). However, at the same time, there is a need to recognize that socialization and cultural values may manifest differently across different institutional types, and vary greatly if student affairs professionals come from multiple academic or professional backgrounds (Weidman et al., 2001). This variation presents challenges for achieving consistency in socialization to the values of student affairs among an increasingly diversifying professional workforce. For example, Cotner-Klinger (2013), drawing upon Kegan (1994) and Van Maanen (1978), surveyed entry-level professionals through ACPA and found that individuals participating in a defined and purposeful new employee orientation were more highly socialized within the organization than those who did not participate in one. This suggests that socialization into student affairs may require intentional efforts and practices, even among those sharing a similar affiliation to the field through membership in a national association.

The socialization literature and limited research applying these theories to student affairs professionals adds another dimension of literature to this study. While the meaning making and self-authorship theories described above illustrate the importance of context and relationships, the theories of socialization operationalize the manner in which context and relationships truly impact the meaning making process. Moreover, as was pointed out above, the meaning making and self-authorship research has a tendency to be biased towards viewing the developmental process as one that is internal to the individual and occurring primarily at a cognitive level. The theories of organizational socialization balance out this tendency by strengthening the argument for studying meaning making as a process that is both cognitive and relational, where individuals and their environment intersect.

Related literature on mid-level student affairs professionals. Another segment of the literature looks at mid-level student affairs professionals in ways that meaningfully intersect this study (Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; McClellan, 2012; Roper, 2011; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Saunders & Cooper, 1999; Sermersheim & Keim, 2005; Tull, 2006; White, 2011; Wilson et al, 2013; Windle, 1998). Johnsrud and Rosser (1999) found that mid-level administrators at research universities "have the lowest level of morale" (p. 135) among participants in their research, a finding of note given the intended sampling criteria for this study. McClellan (2012) attributed this challenge faced by mid-level professionals to the fact that "Middle managers are often called on to interpret, enact, and explain policy, but they may not be involved in creating it. Put another way, they have just enough authority and power to be responsible

but not enough to be in control" (p. 3). Additionally, mid-level professionals may be challenged for the first time in their transition to a mid-level position to effectively supervise other full-time professionals, leading to anxiety and exacerbating the challenges associated with fulfilling responsibilities that are increasing complex and ambiguous (Roper, 2011; Tull, 2006; White, 2011).

Despite these challenges, having support for the career transition into a position at the mid-level is something that has been shown to effectively mitigate potential obstacles (Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). In a study of 2,000 mid-level managers looking at work-life balance, satisfaction, morale, and intentions to leave the university, Rosser (2004) found, "that the more positive midlevel leaders perceive the support for their career and developmental activities, the more satisfied they become and less likely to leave their institution" (p. 330). This same data suggested, that among student affairs professionals specifically, they value "more than other work life issues – the importance of fostering positive relationships with those they interact with; more specifically, they enjoy building positive relationships with colleagues within and between work units" (Rosser & Javinar, 2003, p. 823). Relationship building across student affairs departments may play a critical role in the growth and development of mid-level professionals (Wilson et al., 2013).

The limited amount of research into the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals in colleges and universities also sheds some light upon the research questions to be examined in this study. Of seven professional skill sets, Fey and Carpenter (1996) found that research and evaluation was the second lowest in terms of

perceived importance among mid-level student affairs administrators. Windle (1998) found that research and evaluation was the competency area perceived as needing the highest amount of further development among mid-level student affairs professionals, with the exception of professionals with earned doctoral degrees. A study of senior student affairs officers by Saunders and Cooper (1999) looking to determine the perceived skills and competencies that would be most important for those aspiring to mid-level positions, interestingly also found that research skills were perceived as the least essential from among the skill sets included. A more recent national study on this topic (Sermersheim & Keim, 2005) found that research and evaluation was the lowest utilized skill set (of those listed) among mid-level student affairs professionals, but was also one area in which 56% of participants felt they needed improvement.

These studies paint a bleak picture with respect to mid-level student affairs professionals. While the research into experiences at the mid-level is limited, it suggests that it is a level of the profession filled with anxiety, ambiguity, and in need of cross-departmental relationship building and career support in order to help navigate an increasingly complex set of demands and expectations. Similarly, the perceived abilities of mid-level student affairs professionals for demonstrating student learning outcomes through research, assessment, and evaluation practices is equally as gloomy as the research looking at this same competency area among entry-level professionals in the field. This is a disturbing finding that this study aims to further explore. Nearly a decade has passed since Rosser and Javinar (2003) found that increasing compliance and accountability standards seemed to have little impact on the work-life satisfaction and

morale of mid-level student affairs administrators, yet they also noted that "the perceptions of these review and intervention issues need to be monitored for their continued effect on the student affairs leaders' satisfaction and morale" (p. 825). Although not explicitly examining work-life satisfaction and morale among mid-level student affairs professionals, this study looks to update this conversation, examining the ways in which accountability and assessment practices and expectations influence meaning making for this same population of university administrators.

Student Affairs and Assessing Student Learning Outcomes

The fourth and final section of the literature review for this study ties together the theoretical and applied literature from the previous three sections through the lens of the research into student affairs and the assessment of student learning outcomes. Noticeably absent from the literature in this area is research exploring the meaning making process among mid-level student affairs professionals and the structures and processes by which these practitioners understand this aspect of their jobs. Ultimately, addressing this gap is what this study seeks to contribute to the field. The three subsections in this portion of the literature review present existing research on demonstrating student learning outcomes in student affairs, assessment as a student affairs competency standard, and research on entry-level student affairs professionals and their assessment competency.

Demonstrating student learning outcomes in student affairs. The writing of Upcraft and Schuh (1996) articulated guidance for the first group of studies in this section of the literature review. They identified how to effectively execute student learning outcomes assessment in student affairs:

> Unfortunately, among many staff in student affairs, assessment is an unknown quantity at best, or at worst, it is misguided and misused. It has been our experience that while everyone in student affairs would agree that assessment is important, too often it is considered a low priority and never conducted in any systematic, comprehensive way. And even if it is done, it is often done poorly; as a result, it simply gathers dust on someone's shelf, with little or no impact. (p. 4)

In a 2004 study of 216 senior student affairs professionals at small colleges (500-3,000 students), Doyle found, "that assessment was one of the least well-practiced actions of student affairs divisions" (p. 389), arguing that "student affairs divisions are much better at building good relationships with students than managing their administrative responsibilities" (p. 388). Another study found that only 56% of senior student affairs officers reported measuring learning outcomes of any kind (Bresciani, 2002).

Consequently, researchers and practitioners have published a wealth of documents over the last 15 years to show how student learning outcomes assessment (and general program evaluation) in student affairs can be bolstered. Early studies sought to confirm that learning did in fact happen outside of the classroom (Kuh, 1995), and that assessment was a platform for student affairs professionals to collaborate with academic affairs (Banta & Kuh, 1998), despite the inherent obstacles that accompany efforts to study student learning outcomes (Terenzini, 1989). Kuh (1995) conducted an exploratory qualitative study with graduating seniors to identify the association between out-of-the-classroom experiences and student learning and development, finding that students viewed these experiences as real-world laboratories. Banta and Kuk (1998) argued that

assessment efforts like the Kuh (1995) study are "one of the few institutional activities in which faculty and student affairs professionals can participate as equal partners" (p. 42). This further established the importance of learning outcomes assessments in student affairs.

More recent publications have sought to advance not simply that student affairs plays a role in fostering student learning outcomes, but how best to do so, especially in light of heightened calls for accountability in higher education (Bresciani, 2011a; Bresciani, 2011b; Collins & Roberts, 2012; Manderino & Meents-DeCaigny, 2012; Rothenburg, 2011). One recent study examined three student affairs divisions at large research institutions identified as having "high-quality" assessment practices (Green et al., 2008; Green, 2006). This study concluded that support for learning assessment activities, particularly decentralized assessment within the various functional areas of student affairs, coordinated by a director or a committee and charged to do so by the senior student affairs officer, was key to conducting useful assessments. Unfortunately, most of the data collected to reach these conclusions came from the senior student affairs officer and the lead assessment staff member in student affairs at each of the three institutions.

Another recent study examined how student affairs divisions can build a culture of evidence at community colleges (Oburn, 2005), stating, "by demonstrating that student affairs divisions offer quality programs that contribute significantly to student access, learning, and success" (p. 32), student affairs professionals can help support institutional effectiveness efforts. Seagraves and Dean (2010) studied accreditation efforts at three

small colleges, finding that leadership from the senior student affairs officer, an attitude of using assessment to improve programs and services, and a collegial supportive atmosphere are all keys to developing a culture of assessment among student affairs divisions. Creating a "culture" of assessment into which individuals are socialized is a finding that has been articulated by multiple studies (Barham & Scott, 2006; Hodes, 2009; Julian, 2013; Kirsky, 2010; Schuh, 2013). While culture has been inconsistently understood across these studies, the fact that it is identified repeatedly in the literature suggests the need to explore the intersection of the individual and the organization.

Lastly, several studies have found the importance of specific staffing and training approaches to building the capacity for student affairs professionals to conduct student learning outcomes assessment. Slager and Oaks (2013) described the strategy of using assessment coaches at one large research university to help "staff overcome barriers of assessment such as lack of resources, lack of knowledge related to conducting a rigorous assessment, or negative attitudes towards assessment" (p. 29). Hodes (2009) also found that individual mentoring and related professional development opportunities would be ways to overcome fear and gaps in assessment skill sets among student affairs professionals. Similarly, Livingston and Zerulik (2013) found that enhancing the assessment skill sets of student affairs professionals is one of the primary challenges of the emerging role of student affairs assessment coordinators (Tull & Kuk, 2012).

Assessment of student learning as a student affairs competency standard. The findings around assessment skill sets and the need for training as components of the literature on how to effectively conduct student learning outcomes assessment in student

affairs provides a natural transition to examine student affairs competency standards around assessment, evaluation, and research. This competency standard, among others of importance for the field of student affairs, is most clearly codified by the joint ACPA and NASPA publication titled *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (2010). The emergence of this publication is itself further evidence of the ways in which student affairs has responded to the policy conversation on accountability in higher education, illustrating a set of developmental standards for practitioners in the field. It is worth noting that, following the culmination of the data collection for this study, ACPA and NASPA released a draft of an updated set of these professional competencies. While new competency standards were added, the language for the assessment, evaluation, and research standard was left largely unchanged.

A number of scholars have explored competencies of student affairs professionals, both before and after the initial publication of the ACPA-NASPA standards, examining assessment abilities alongside a range of others. In a meta-analysis of 30 years of research on successful student affairs administration, Lovell and Kosten (2000) found that 57% of studies on the subject included research, evaluation, and assessment as a necessary skill for student affairs professionals. They also wrote, "However, the level of sophistication required to demonstrate this effectiveness is increasing. Assessing knowledge is becoming a common staple for today's student affairs administrators" (p. 567). An update to this study stated, "research, assessment, and evaluation were found to be the most frequently mentioned items in the literature" (Herdlein, Reifler, & Mrowka, 2013) as desired skills for student affairs professionals,

with “55% of the articles identifying research and assessment as an important knowledge area while 68% identified research/assessment/evaluation as an important skill in the field” (p. 263). In yet another meta-analysis on professionalism in student affairs, Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) found, “It may be that, since scholarship and research are frequently not familiar tasks, they are not considered to be as enjoyable or even as necessary, as, say, advising a student organization president or planning a program, or any of the thousands of other tasks confronting busy student affairs workers” (p. 272). Thus, while these skills may be valuable and necessary, those in the field may perceive them as undesirable.

In a 2004 study, Herdlein examined the perception of 50 senior student affairs officers about graduate preparation programs. The results of his study found that only 16% of senior student affairs officers found graduates of student affairs administration programs to be proficient or above average with assessment and research abilities. More recently, Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) reviewed assessment-related skills, specifically student learning and development outcomes, in 1,759 student affairs job postings from 2008, concluding “slightly more than one in four (27.1%) of the positions posted required applicants to either demonstrate competency in assessing student learning or to complete learning assessment duties as a part of the job” (p. 508). They found no differences in skills required from public to private institutions or across institutions of different sizes, with multicultural services, new student programs, and student activities having assessment skills most often included in job requirements. They also stated, “requirements for assessment skills and duties were less prevalent among entry-level

positions that required less education and experience and more prevalent among mid-level and senior-level jobs that carried greater requirements for the education and experience of job applicants" (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010, p. 507).

Entry-level student affairs professionals and assessment competencies. While the previous set of studies examined assessment of student learning outcomes as a competency for student affairs professionals in general, another area of the literature examines assessment competencies among entry-level practitioners in the field. Interestingly, a recent book on being socialized as an entry-level professional in student affairs failed to mention assessment or evaluation as a component of the socialization process (Tull, Hirt, & Saunders, 2009). One study examined the perceptions of 104 senior and mid-level student affairs professionals of competencies needed for entry-level professionals in the field, finding that program evaluation was ranked 25th out of 32 desired competencies (Burkard et al., 2005). A more recent study of senior student affairs officers and graduate preparation program faculty found that a large assessment competency deficit exists among entry-level professionals, concluding, "graduate preparation programs should also consider placing greater emphasis on outcomes-based assessment within research and program evaluation course sequences" (Dickerson et al., 2011, p. 476). Yet another study exploring the perceptions of senior student affairs officers, mid-level managers, and program faculty found that faculty members viewed administrative practices, organizational management, and change competencies as less relevant for entry-level professionals than senior and mid-level managers (Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007).

Thus, while outcomes-based assessment, research, and evaluation skills may exist among a long list of desired competencies of entry-level student affairs professionals, graduate programs and graduate faculty seem to emphasize the development of this skill set less than practitioners. Young and Janosik (2007) wrote that graduates of CAS-compliant masters programs reported greater confidence in their abilities as new professionals, but their lowest level of confidence was in the area of research foundations. They concluded, "at least based on the responses in this study, the curricula in master's level preparation programs may not provide enough preparation in assessment and research to help graduates play a meaningful role in this arena" (p. 361).

Another study surveyed over 1,200 new professionals to identify the skills developed in their graduate programs and the extent to which these skills were used in their first position (Waple, 2006). Out of 28 competencies learned through graduate programs, student outcomes assessment was ranked 19th, program evaluation 20th, and assessment of student affairs programs 21st (these competencies were ranked 24th, 17th, and 23rd respectively, for perceived use in entry-level positions) (Waple, 2006). This pattern was validated by a more recent survey-based study of new student affairs professionals finding that 22% spend no time on assessment activities in a given week, while 70% spend 5 hours or less (Hoffman, 2010). Another survey of entry-level professionals and their supervisors about the competencies that were developed through their graduate programs concluded that recent entry-level staff members rated their abilities to understand quantitative and qualitative research higher than their supervisors' perceptions of their abilities to do so (Cuyjet et al., 2009). Similarly, in a qualitative study

of 90 new professionals transitioning into their first job in student affairs, assessment and evaluation was consistently described as one of the skills that new professionals found themselves to be missing (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).

Collectively, the studies in this section on the assessment competencies of entry-level student affairs professionals highlight a paradox to be explored by this study. Specifically, this cluster of studies shows that assessment of student learning is not perceived to be an important competency for entry-level professionals, despite a desire among senior-level practitioners and graduate program faculty to more strongly emphasize such competencies in master's level student affairs programs (Dickerson et al. 2011). Similarly, these studies show how entry-level professionals perceive themselves to have a deficit in their competencies for evaluating student learning, and moreover, that their entry-level positions do not require them to develop this competency through the responsibilities of their positions. As a result, one can conclude that most student affairs professionals are not challenged to assess student learning outcomes until they reach mid-level roles (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010), and, moreover, they likely have not developed the competencies for assessing student learning when they arrive at the mid-level. This is a perfect illustration of Kegan's (1994) notion of the increasing complexities of the modern-day curriculum. The purpose of this study is to examine how individual mid-level student affairs professionals experience this increase in complexity – what happens when they are tasked with a new set of job responsibilities that requires them to have a competency for assessing student learning outcomes that they might not have previously developed, and how they make meaning of these responsibilities.

Synthesis

The literature reviewed and analyzed in this chapter a highlights several overarching points worthy of being rearticulated. First, the fast-paced nature of the contemporary workplace presents substantial cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal complexity across organizational settings and industries (Berger, 2012; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Kegan, 1994). Understanding the sources, mechanisms, and processes by which this complexity is negotiated, navigated, and reconciled is meaningful as both a scholarly and practical venture. At a practical level, fostering greater capacities for meaning making in an increasingly complex work environment will produce positive benefits for both the individual and the organization. Berger (2012) argued, "It is more than just knowing what *work* you're supposed to do but also knowing what *sense* you're supposed to make of that work that will help you be effective and satisfied with your job" (p. 155). On a scholarly level, additional research is needed to understand the processes by which meaning making occurs in a manner that considers the intersection of the individual and the organizational environment. Regrettably, the vast majority of studies, as illustrated above, focus on either the individual as an independent actor or the organization, without any concern for the individual and their motivations, beliefs, values, and perceptions. This study aims to recognize the importance and interconnectedness of both perspectives.

Second, the literature on meaning making, self-authorship, organizational socialization, and other concepts described in previous sections clearly recognize that these processes are ones in which individuals actively construct their realities. Kegan and Lahey (2001) most eloquently summarized this belief, stating, "people create their own

reality rather than picking one up that exists out there. Conflict, feedback, and interpersonal disagreement can all be understand as expressions of our ability to compose meaning – different meanings from another's" (p. 138). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2011) described this process as "job crafting" – "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work" (p. 179). This construction process is one that occurs from an interaction between the individual and multiple aspects of their work environment. It is here that the concepts of holding environments, the crossroads, critical incidents, and provocative moments are relevant, as each may actively contribute to the meaning making construction process.

Moreover, this construction process is inherently developmental, as it results from consistently evolving feedback and meaning making loops over time, influencing the search for agency or communion and the extent to which that search is directed inward towards the self or outward towards others. From Kegan's (1994) orders of consciousness, to Baxter Magolda's (2008) articulation of the theory of self-authorship, to Schein's (1971) definition of organizational socialization, and all of the literature examined in between, this study is grounded in a recognition that individuals can achieve greater levels of meaning making capacity over time. As a theoretical concept, it is focused not just on what we know, but on how we have come to know it. The meaning making and multiple identity filter concept (Abes et al., 2007) referenced above is yet another concept worth revisiting here, given its potential application to this study. The evolution of one's meaning making filter over time, and the contribution of that filter to the individual's ability to navigate increasing levels of complexity as a mechanism for

exploring the process and outcomes of meaning making, is a useful concept for this study.

At the same time, however, this developmental process is influenced by power dynamics, conflict, role negotiation, organizational cues, role prototyping, and organizational routines, all of which are value-laden aspects of any social environment or workplace. While greater levels of meaning making capacity may be desirable, both for the individual and the organization, this study also acknowledges that the forces contributing to that developmental process may have unintended or negative consequences. In most circumstances, this process will privilege those individuals in positions of authority, and those norms deriving their value and acceptance from a source of power, as exerting greater influence on the individual, their environment, and the constructive developmental process of meaning making.

Finally, this literature review provided appropriate background and justification for seeking to answer each of the research questions articulated in the first chapter of this study, presented here again to remind the reader:

(1) How do mid-level student affairs professionals make meaning of and perceive their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes?

(2) Through what structures and processes do mid-level student affairs professionals come to make meaning of (or not make meaning of) responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes?

(3) How does the organization/environment influence the structures and processes of meaning making?

The literature reviewed above fails to adequately address these questions. If one combines the relatively recent emergence of assessment as a formalized competency standard in the field of student affairs with the heightening importance of assessment and accountability in higher education, and the limited application of meaning making theories to the specific experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals, a grounded theory approach is both justified and necessary for this study based upon these conclusions from the literature. As Jones (1995) argued, "Grounded theory is a particularly appropriate research method when the discovery of new theoretical frameworks, based upon the perceptions and understandings of those living the experience, is needed" (p. 14). The increasingly complex contemporary curriculum of the workplace (Berger, 2012; Kegan, 1994) compels an examination the structures and processes of meaning making that mid-level student affairs professionals are navigating as they endeavor to understand and act on their evolving responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. While the next chapter will go into greater detail about grounded theory and the methodology for the study, the literature review of this chapter has sought to justify and contextual the study itself, as well as why a grounded theory approach to pursuing answers to the study's questions is an appropriate design choice.

CHAPTER THREE

This study explores the process by which mid-level student affairs professionals at colleges and universities make meaning of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. As stated in the first chapter, this study is built upon the qualitative research methodology of grounded theory. This chapter describes this methodology in greater depth, examining the philosophical foundations of qualitative methods and grounded theory research. The chapter then proceeds to present this study's choices for participants, data collection methods, data analysis, and the process for achieving data goodness and trustworthiness.

Research Design

While an array of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed research methodologies exist to explore how mid-level student affairs professionals make sense of their responsibility for demonstrating student learning outcomes, the topic inherently lends itself to a qualitative approach, which is best suited for considering understandings, processes, and contexts (Maxwell, 2013). Broadly defined, qualitative research "is an inquiry based process of understanding based upon distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Compared to the random sampling of quantitative

methods and its purpose of generalizing findings to a broader population, qualitative research focuses on the selection of a unique sample that "is purposefully drawn with an emphasis on information-rich cases that elicit an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 65). Philosophically, qualitative methods recognize that knowledge is contextual and constructed, and in order to produce the resulting analysis and findings, the researcher must systematically interpret that data collected from participants.

Grounded theory. Methodologically, this study draws upon the philosophical and epistemological traditions underlying qualitative research, and specifically, a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) informed by a constructive orientation towards the development of knowledge (Jones et al., 2006). By exploring a process and experience from the perspective of those who live it, "grounded theory methodology employs a systematic and structured set of procedures to build an inductively derived theory grounded in the actual data and informed by the area under study" (Jones et al., 2006, p. 42). Although there have been multiple perspectives on grounded theory since its initial explication by Glaser and Strauss (1967), this study will employ the more recent understanding of grounded theory as articulated by Charmaz (2006).

Before elaborating on grounded theory itself, it is necessary to step back and justify why a grounded theory design is an appropriate design choice for this study. The primary purpose of grounded theory in qualitative research is to develop an analytic and inductive theory resulting from a systematic exploration of collected data, and specifically, to do so when existing theories may be missing or incomplete to explain a

particular phenomenon of interest (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Jones, 1995). In addition to the reasons articulated below, a previously executed pilot study on this topic with four participants that took place during the summer of 2013 highlighted the need to analytically and theoretically examine the idea of a meaning making filter through which mid-level student affairs professionals process their experiences with assessing student learning outcomes. While the literature review above analyzed and synthesized a number of existing theories of meaning making, nothing in the field fully captures the complexities of the meaning making process for mid-level student affairs professionals in the fulfillment of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes.

Several conclusions from the literature review reinforce this assertion. First, the codification of assessing student learning in student affairs has only happened recently, with the formal adoption of competency standards by ACPA and NASPA in 2010. Prior research has explored the role of assessment in the lives of individual student affairs practitioners, but no studies have done so from a qualitative perspective since the adoption of the formal ACPA and NASPA competency standards. This creates an opportunity for the collection of rich data to develop a theoretical understanding of how one group of student affairs professionals makes sense of their assessment work in light of the recent industry-wide adoption of competency standards. To use Kegan's (1994) metaphor of the increasing complexity of the modern-day curriculum, it can be argued that the establishment of student affairs competency standards within the broader accountability-driven policy context in higher education necessitates a theoretical examination of meaning making at work among student affairs professionals. This

relatively recent and substantial shift in the complexity of the work of student affairs professionals is one component of establishing a rationale for a grounded theory approach.

Additionally, despite the literature on meaning making at work, the meta-analysis cited above (Rosso et al., 2010) illustrates a need for more theoretically-driven research that considers the intersection of the individual and their environment and the interaction between the two, in the process of meaning making at work. This study, utilizing grounded theory, is one effort to do so. Most existing studies focus either on the individual and his or her meaning making, or on the influence of the organization on the meaning making process of individuals, but relatively few combine these two efforts into an integrated theoretical exploration of meaning making from both perspectives. Furthermore, existing literature on meaning making in student affairs has largely not accounted for the experiences of mid-level professionals. As was articulated above, the responsibility for assessing student learning outcomes is increasingly a role responsibility for mid-level professionals (Bresciani & Hoffman, 2010), yet however, entry-level professionals feel unprepared to assess student learning and their entry-level roles offer them little experience to develop their competency for doing so. Consequently, this area is ripe for a theoretical examination of how an individual comes to negotiate the complexities of a new role responsibility when they may have had little preparation and prior experience in fulfilling that responsibility. Given the increasing number of mid-level student affairs professionals and the growing importance of assessing student learning outcomes, a theoretical study that attempts to explain the structures and

processes by which mid-level professionals make meaning of this job responsibility is of vital importance. The existing "meta" theories of meaning making, self-authorship, and organizational socialization, may still be relevant, but fail to capture the nuances of meaning making for the individuals who are the focus of this study, particularly when considering how the responsibility for assessing student learning outcomes has recently emerged.

Lastly, grounded theory is the most appropriate choice for a methodological approach to answering the research questions guiding this study. Taken collectively, the three research questions of this study seek to understand the meaning making structures, processes, and perceptions of mid-level student affairs professionals, and how these meaning making structures, processes, and perceptions occur for individuals within their organizational and environmental contexts. The purpose in both asking these questions and seeking to answer them is to fill the previously articulated void in the existing theoretical literature on meaning making at work and mid-level student affairs professionals. Moreover, as described in the literature, meaning making is itself a constructive and developmental phenomenon, and grounded theory is ideally suited for developing an understanding of constructive and developmental phenomenon where existing theories may be insufficient.

While the "techniques" of grounded theory will be described in a subsequent section on the methods of this study, a few additional words about grounded theory itself are in order. Charmaz (2006) argued, "Neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded

theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices (p. 10). Charmaz (2006) elaborated, "Researcher participants' implicit meanings, experiential views – and researchers' finished grounded theories – are constructions of reality" (p. 10). As a result, the stories told by participants in interviews and the analysis of these stories must be understood as constructed, and not objective truths in any traditional and positivist sense.

Participants

This study included ten participants, although two participants were only able to participate in the first phase of data collection, which is a limitation of the study. Participants in the study were currently employed mid-level student affairs professionals, as defined above, at a four-year public college or university with 10,000 or more undergraduate students. The sampling criteria used to select individual participants will be elaborated below, but broadly speaking, the study employed purposeful and maximum variation sampling strategies (Jones et al. 2006). The sampling was purposeful in that individuals selected for the study needed to meet specific inclusion criteria consistent with the goals and research questions of the study. To the extent possible, a maximum variation strategy was used to consider participants who are identified through purposeful strategies. This maximum variation strategy was an attempt to find individuals who meet the inclusion criteria of the study, but who work across an array of student affairs functional areas, as the responsibility for assessing student learning outcomes is not restricted to any particular department or area (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010).

Selection criteria. Arguably, the responsibility of student affairs professionals for

assessing student learning outcomes is greater at a public institution than at a private or for-profit institution. Calls for greater public accountability for the use of state-provided funding, while potentially impacting the experience of student affairs professionals at all institutions, has the most direct applicability within public colleges and universities, and was a relevant factor in considering possible individuals and sites to serve as data sources for this study. Second, targeting student affairs professionals at institutions serving 10,000 or more undergraduates was an intentional choice, resulting from a general awareness that the responsibility of student affairs professionals for assessing student learning outcomes is arguably going to be the most present at institutions serving the largest numbers of students. A recent study by the National Association of Campus Activities (NACA), found that among student activities professionals, 87% of those not yet engaged in assessment planning efforts were at institutions with less than 20,000 full-time equivalent students (2014), so there may be support more specific for this study's sampling criteria.

Participants were purposefully selected to represent a range of programmatically-focused functional areas in student affairs - career services, residence life, student involvement, leadership education, orientation/first-year experience, fraternity and sorority life, international programs, or multicultural programs. While learning outcomes assessment may happen across all functional areas in student affairs, programming departments arguably have the greatest opportunity to assess student learning, making participants from these areas an appropriate choice for selection in this study. Participants were also purposefully selected to have transitioned into a mid-level role within the last

five years, as that time window coincides with the adoption of the ACPA and NASPA competency standards, acting as a common marker for the most recent expansion of the importance of assessing student learning outcome within the field. Additionally, no two participants were selected from the same college or university to fully ensure the confidentiality of each participant. While demographic variables such as race, gender, ethnicity, and alike will not explicitly be included in the sampling process, the intention was to have a group of participants who broadly represent the overall diversity within the profession of student affairs.

In order to generate participants in the study, a call was solicited over multiple listservs (see Appendix F for an example of a recruitment message), including Student Affairs Assessment Leaders, the ACPA Mid-Level Community of Practice, and the NASPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community. This call asked those receiving the message to identify possible study participants meeting the criteria described above who might be considered "superb" professionals in executing their student learning outcomes assessment responsibilities at their institution. 15 individuals were nominated for participation, though several were omitted because they did not meet the intended selection criteria for the study. Individuals identified through the sampling strategies and meeting the participation criteria described above were asked to validate their eligibility to participate via email prior to the initial round of data collection as a form of pre-screening. Participants were asked if assessing student learning outcomes is the sole or primary responsibility in his or her job. Anyone for whom this was the case was excluded from participation. The intention of the study was to explore the topic of

meaning making regarding assessing student learning outcomes for mid-level student affairs professionals for whom this responsibility is one piece of their role, but not a primary one. Given the emergence of division-wide assessment director positions in student affairs (Tull & Kuk, 2012), and given the purpose of this study, this exclusion criteria was appropriate.

The pre-screening process also asked participants if they execute this portion of their job directly or indirectly through the supervision of staff. Possible participants who were identified through this pre-screening process as being responsible for assessing student learning outcomes in a manner that is only indirect through the supervision of their staff were also excluded from participation. As this study sought to understand the meaning making process for how individual student affairs professionals make sense of a specific job responsibility, it was appropriate to require that participants in the study see themselves as having a direct role in fulfilling that responsibility. Lastly, the pre-screening process asked possible participants to confirm their ability and commitment to participate in each aspect of the data collection process (described below) in an attempt to prevent participant attrition.

Participant overview. Before moving forward, a brief overview of each individual participant is necessary. While a short table summarizing the participants, their genders, and functional area of responsibility in student affairs is presented in Appendix E, this section is meant to introduce readers to the participants in a more narrative form. Ultimately, readers will become more familiar with the participants in the subsequent chapters, as direct quotations will be used to highlight relevant findings from the data

analysis.

Will. In a student activities office, Will regularly described experiences in which he was fighting and uphill battle to assess the learning outcomes of programs and events. The divisional assessment director position at Will's institution had recently been cut, and this seemed to hinder Will's opportunity to advance data-driven decision making within his department. During the course of the study, Will used his tuition benefits to take advanced statistics courses to improve his skills in quantitative data analysis, and also conducted informational interviews with professionals in institutional research offices to learn about career opportunities that he might find more fulfilling in that area.

Elaine. During the study, Elaine was serving double-duty, fulfilling the responsibilities of her regular position, but also acting in an interim capacity while her supervisor was away from the institution on leave. One of the Elaine's responsibilities was overseeing course-based tutoring services for her campus. At several points in the study, Elaine remarked how she found this particular function being located in a student affairs division to be unique, and consequently, how her office was out-in-front of many other student affairs offices with assessment practices.

Joan. As a mid-level residence life professional at a large institution, Joan had a number of peers at her level serving in the same role but overseeing different residential areas of the campus. While Joan found was to integrate student learning outcomes assessment into her work with her area, she talked about feeling frustrated in relationships with peers because she had to avoid the subject in conversations with them. Towards the end of the study, Joan accepted a new position to oversee all of residence

life at another large institution in a different state. Joan was also pursuing her PhD during the course of this study.

Sasha. In overseeing leadership and community service programming for her institution, Sasha was committed to using different assessment techniques to gauge student learning outcomes. She was very aware of finding an assessment method that matched the nature of the program and would allow her and her team to collect meaningful data. While the position she held during the course of this study was not her first mid-level position, it was the first in which assessing student learning was an expectation. Her successes in this area of her role saw her and her department gain recognition within their student affairs division as a model for other areas.

Carmen. Carmen was strongly committed to using assessment as a mechanism for ensuring that programs and services of her office were accessible to students. Working at a land-grant institution, accessibility was very important to Carmen, and was an aspect of her institutional mission in which she strongly believed. As a result, responsible collection and dissemination of data is extremely important to Carmen. In addition to her work within alcohol and drug programming at her institution, Carmen also co-chairs her division's assessment committee, and was taking PhD courses during her participation in this study.

Olivia. Like Joan and Carmen, Olivia was also pursuing her PhD during her participation in this study. For the duration of the study, Olivia was working full-time in a student involvement office, but near the end, had accepted an offer to transition into a position within academic affairs at her institution that would allow her to focus even

more on her passion for assessing student learning outcomes. Olivia had substantial experience in building assessment skills in others, both within her department and through facilitating workshops at and beyond her institution. During the interviews for this study, Olivia often commented on how she would experiment with new forms of data collection to expand her horizons for effective assessment practices.

Leilani. Leilani had only been in her position overseeing judicial affairs within residence life at her new institution for a few months when this study began. However, she had significant experience in and passion for assessing student learning in previous positions at other institutions that she wanted to bring into her new role. One of her biggest priorities was to establish learning outcomes for her institution's student conduct process and mechanism for how those outcomes would be assessed. By the end of the study, she had a committee of colleagues in place to help her develop these outcomes and assessment practices.

Wyatt. Wyatt's counseling background and strong commitment to social justice strongly inform how he approaches his work with intercultural programming, including the supervision of his staff and his execution of assessment responsibilities. Wyatt was a firm believer in recognizing that if departments within student affairs divisions do not adopt assessment practices that are consistent with their unique cultural values, that they will be imposed upon them from elsewhere. Consequently, getting out ahead of these demands, establishing autonomy, and developing an assessment practice that would be authentic to the needs and values of his department were all high priorities for Wyatt.

Martie. Martie was one of two participants in the study who was only able to

complete the first interview. As a director of residence life, there were a number of challenges that arose on her campus during the duration of the study that prevented her from continuing on in the study after the first conversation. However, service to the community was of strong importance to Martie, as it was a core value for her institution, and was something she spoke of strongly in describing her motivation to foster student learning within residence life.

Elizabeth. The other participant in the study who was only able to participate in the first interview was Elizabeth. By the start of the study, Elizabeth had already completed her PhD, making her somewhat unique as compared to the other nine participants. During her interview, Elizabeth commented at several points about her curiosity for mining institutional data sets. She would often partner with those in institutional research at her office to make connections between the local data she was collecting in student union programs and larger institutional assessments. While assessment was only a portion of her position, Elizabeth talked about a desire to find time to do more of it.

Methods

Charmaz (2006) stated, "Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves. The guidelines offer a general set of principles and heuristic devices rather than formulaic rules" (p. 2). Consequently, the application of grounded theory for this study viewed these methods from this flexible and general perspective. This allowed the devices and practices of grounded theory to be applied in a

manner that is adapted to meet the needs and purpose of this study and not conform to a set of prescribed rules that cannot be augmented. As grounded theory relies upon in-depth and rich data as told by individuals themselves, the primary mechanism of data collection for this study was the interview. Participants in the study were interviewed twice. An initial, semi-structured interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) occurred at the start of the process. By definition, a semi-structured interview acts as a guide that includes "an outline of topics to be covered, with suggested questions" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130), but allows for sufficient flexibility for the researcher to use follow-up questions as warranted during the interview process. An interview protocol for this initial, semi-structured interview is presented in Appendix A. Before the initial interview was held, participants electronically received an informed consent statement for the study, acknowledging that their participation was voluntary and could be ended at any point in time (see Appendix C).

Prior to the start of the first interview, participants were asked to select a pseudonym to be carried with them throughout subsequent stages of the study, and these pseudonyms are used to identify them in data analysis and publication of the study. Each initial interview lasted approximately 60 minutes in length. Participants were geographically distributed across the United States, and consequently, interviews took place by videoconference (when possible) or phone call. Interviews were electronically recorded for subsequent transcription. The electronic records and transcripts were maintained in a secure, password-protected directory and backed up on a secure, password-protected cloud drive. Participants also provided a current, written job

description for their present role, which was considered in framing questions during the initial interview.

Subsequently, participants kept an action research journal, in which they documented experiences related to the focus of this study – those experiences at work where something occurred related their responsibility for assessing student learning. Participants were asked, in a method of their choosing, to track what happened, who was involved, and how they felt at the time, as well as any reflective interpretation they might have had about these work-related experiences. In this sense, these reflective journals served as an opportunity to collect data about critical incidents, transitional experiences at the crossroads, the influences of others and the environment in the meaning making process, and other salient concepts connected back to the literature review in the prior chapter. As the literature review for this study recognized that meaning making occurs at the intersection between the individual and their environment, these action research journals served to gather data about the interactions between individuals and their environment that did not arise during the initial interview, making the data collected and analyzed for the study much richer and increasing the trustworthiness of the findings.

Participants were asked to keep this journal for eight weeks, submitting their reflections twice, once at the end of four weeks and once again after eight weeks. Each submission included reflection questions that were posed to the participants. The initial set of reflection questions were informed by the coding and memoing that occurred following the first set of interviews. The second set of reflection questions emanated from the coding and memoing based on the first journal reflection submission. When

applicable and relevant, reflection questions that tied back to concepts from the literature review were included. These reflection questions can be seen in Appendix D. Finally, participants were interviewed a second time for approximately 60 minutes, reflecting back on the initial interview and their own writings from the action research journal. A second, semi-structured protocol was created for these closing interviews (see Appendix B). These interviews were also recorded, transcribed, and securely archived using the same process as the initial interviews.

Data Analysis

The data collected from participant interviews and action research journals were analyzed using procedures consistent with the methodological traditions of grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2006). Prior to interview transcription, audio recordings were reviewed in order to capture elements that stood out as noteworthy. Subsequently, transcripts from the interviews were generated within 48 hours. While transcribing, additional notes were captured on items that stood out for possible analysis. The notes generated during the pre-transcription and transcription processes were an initial step in identifying potential findings for the memoing process that commonly occurs in a grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2006). Listening for how participants presented their thoughts, and how an individual's thoughts were interconnected or disjointed during the interview, served the function of identifying broader relationships in the data. This connecting strategy (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) was a way to maintain a perspective for the context and relationships evident in the data as was broken it down into smaller pieces.

Memoing. Because memoing is such a core component of the grounded theory process, it is necessary to discuss it in greater depth before describing subsequent data analysis procedures. Charmaz (2006) described memo-writing as:

> The pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers. Writing successive memos throughout the research process keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you to increase the level of abstraction of your ideas. Certain codes stand out and take form as theoretical categories as you write successive memos. (p. 72)

In this sense, memos are both a self-reflective tool and an analytic device for writing about what is emerging in the data and also how the role of the researcher enters into the process of data analysis. Charmaz (2006) further described, "writing memos prompts you to elaborate on processes, assumptions, and actions covered by your codes or categories," (p. 82) and while there is no perfect strategy for writing a memo, one technique that was adopted from a prior data analysis project in a pilot study was to "interrogate a code or category by asking questions of it" (p. 82). To do this, etymological definitions of the words that emerged in coding and categories were reviewed. Utilizing etymological dictionaries to understanding the history of the words themselves served as a springboard for the "interrogation" process.

Over time, the process of interrogating the data through memoing resulted in crystallizing the language and terms used in the development of theoretical categories, and along the way yielded a narrative explanation that sparked more abstract and conceptual analysis that related codes and categories to one another (Charmaz, 2006).

The iterative memoing process surfaced connections and patterns in the data analysis and made each category less an isolated idea and more a component of a broader picture. Memoing clarified what was happening in the data, where saturation was reached, and how the journaling and second interview protocols needed to be shaped to tease out additional lines of inquiry with participants. Thus, memoing was used to identify gaps in the data collection and analysis, which prompted reengaging participants in new ways for additional data collection.

Coding. After completing the transcriptions and some initial memoing for each interview, recordings were reviewed once more, reading the transcript along with the recording in order to spot any errors and to identify nuances such as where to place punctuation, pauses, or emotions that needed to be captured and did not show up in the raw transcription process. From there, initial coding (Charmaz, 2006) for each transcript was conducted, reviewing two-to-three lines of text, generating short, two-to-six word interpretive statements capturing the researcher's understanding of what is occurring in each snippet of the transcript. This process used a gerund format to capture an interpretation of the action or state that was represented in each two-to-three line snippet of text, remaining authentic to the word choices used by participants, including their words in these initial codes whenever possible, or what is known as *in vivo* coding (Charmaz, 2006). This initial coding process was intended to be "provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data…because you aim to remain open to other analytic possibilities and create codes that best fit the data you have" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48). This same process was also applied to the data generated by participants in their action

research journals.

After initial coding of a transcript or journal submission, codes were organized for that element of data using a spreadsheet. This process was repeated for each element of data. After a list of codes for each element was created and organized, focused codes (Charmaz, 2006) were developed to link together multiple codes within a given transcript or journal entry. The focused coding process was an effort to organize initial codes into unique categories, each of which would represent something uniquely important for that piece of data. This process was then repeated across each piece of data until each had a set of categories that emerged from within it. More memoing occurred throughout these initial and focused coding processes.

All of the categories that emerged from one participant's interview transcripts and journal entries were further integrated, aggregating all of the codes and categories for that participant. This process was repeated for all participants, after which axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) occurred. Similar to the connecting strategies described above (Maxwell & Miller, 2008), axial coding "brings the data back into a coherent whole" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60) following the fracturing of data that occurs in the initial and focused coding processes. The purpose of axial coding for this study was to draw any connections between initial codes, focused codes, memoing ideas, and concepts from the literature review, in order to identify possible categories and subcategories for further analysis.

Following the initial, focused, and axial coding processes, an effort was made to identify theoretical codes that cut across participants (see Appendix G for tables used to begin the theoretical coding process). As described by Charmaz (2006), "theoretical

codes specify possible relationships between categories…and may help you tell an analytic story that has coherence. Hence, these codes not only conceptualize how your codes and categories are related, but also move your analytic story in a theoretical direction" (p. 63). This process resulted in the creation of multiple iterative revisions to a diagram displaying theoretical codes and categories, the relationship between them, and the directionality inherent in those relationships, insofar as it emerges from the data at that point in time. The narrative to accompany this diagram is the culminating theory that is the purpose of the inductive grounded theory process. Both the diagram and the resulting findings to describe it are presented in the subsequent chapter.

Data goodness and trustworthiness. Throughout the coding and categorization process, notes and reflective analytical memos were written to generate possible integrated interpretations of the data. Memoing was also a strategy for ensuring goodness and trustworthiness in the data analysis process, as it sees the researcher engage in a process of reflexivity (Jones et al., 2006) and consider one's interpretation of data codes and categories in light of one's personal background and biases. In this sense, memoing, as a cornerstone of the grounded theory methodology, serves to interpret and analyze data as well as strengthen the validity of the study itself (Maxwell, 2013).

Other strategies, in addition to memoing, were used to ensure data goodness and trustworthiness. Member checking, or presenting the interpretation of one's data to research participants for feedback, is a common approach in qualitative research (Jones et al., 2006; Maxwell, 2013) that was adopted in this study. The pre-screening process described above acted as another approach to ensure the collection of good data. The use

of both coding and connecting strategies (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) also aided in the trustworthiness of the data analysis, in that the data was analyzed both by breaking it into codes, but also by examining it as a whole. Similarly, during the data analysis process, attention was paid to negative cases that did not seem to fit into categories, but may have highlighted unique findings for interpretation. Lastly, memos and interpretations were shared at various points during the study with a fellow doctoral student also engaged in writing a dissertation on a related topic as another strategy to strengthen the validity of its outcomes, with this colleague serving as an informal auditor of the findings. Receiving critical feedback on the data analysis and interpretation in this way was another method to address threats to the trustworthiness of the data analysis and the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

This study explored the process by which mid-level student affairs professionals at colleges and universities make meaning of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. Utilizing grounded theory, this study sought to articulate a theory that can be used to explain the meaning making process of participants and address the research questions that form the foundation for the study. As mentioned in previous chapters, the research questions for the study are:

(1) How do mid-level student affairs professionals make meaning of and perceive their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes?

(2) Through what structures and processes do mid-level student affairs professionals come to make meaning of (or not make meaning of) responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes?

(3) How does the organization/environment influence the structures and processes of meaning making?

This chapter presents the findings of this study by providing a theoretical model that, as a whole, addresses these research questions. The model and its component pieces are derived from the methodology articulated in the previous chapter and integrated with the literature review presented in the second chapter. The chapter will first examine the overall theoretical model (as depicted in Figure 1) and then explore the individual constructs within it, drawing heavily upon the words of participants.

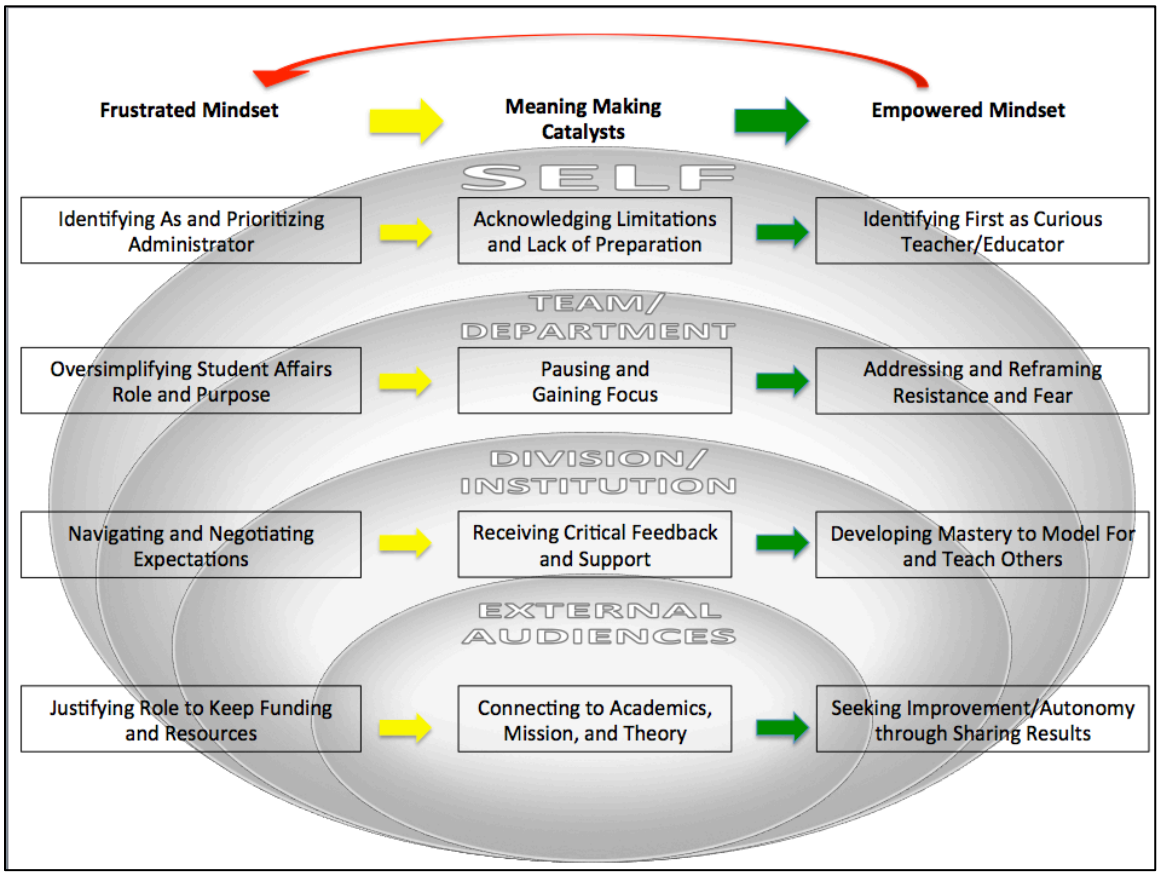

Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Theoretical Model Overview

The theoretical model presented in Figure 1 synthesizes the findings from this study. The model was derived from employing coding and memoing techniques articulated in the previous chapter and based upon data gathered over several months from ten mid-level student affairs professionals at ten different universities in the United States. All but two of the study's participants were interviewed twice and submitted two reflective journal entries (Martie and Elizabeth were only interviewed once and did not submit any journal entries). A component of the second interview protocol was to have

the participants provide feedback on the theoretical model, as it existed at that time, as a form of member checking. Participants' feedback was integrated into the final theoretical model presented in this paper and strengthens the overall trustworthiness of the findings. For example, in the model presented to participants during the second interview, there were no arrows present in the figure. This was done intentionally in order to have participants provide feedback about the flow and directionality of the findings. Similarly, in the version of the model shared with participants the construct that is included in the final as "mindset" was originally framed as "orientation." Several participants commented that "orientation" was not the most appropriate term, and consequently, this was changed to reflect this feedback.

Model structure and directionality. A necessary first step towards articulating the findings of this study is to orient the reader to the overall structure and directionality of the theoretical model presented in Figure 1. While it is perhaps tempting to look at the model and first focus upon the number and titles of its theoretical categories, a broader perspective is necessary. The framework within which the categories presented in the model exist is a constructive and development process informed heavily by the literature reviewed in the second chapter of this paper (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Charmaz, 2006; Jones et al., 2006; Kegan, 1994). The theoretical model is developmental in that it illustrates a series of initial cognitive starting points, encompassed under the heading of frustrated mindset and a number of catalysts that spurred the meaning making process for participants to ultimately arrive at what Kegan (1994) would refer to as a higher order of cognitive complexity, encompassed under the heading of empowered mindset. This

developmental process of moving from a frustrated mindset in framing one's responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes to an empowered mindset mirrors Kegan's (1994) notion of the transition from a socialized mind to a self-authored mind, a finding that will be explored in greater detail throughout this chapter.

Moreover, the model that emerged from the data analysis can be linked back to the meta-analysis of Rosso et al. (2010) described in the literature review. Their meta-analysis synthesized hundreds of research studies, finding that an exploration of meaning making at work must consider two primary factors – sources of meaning, or where meaning at work comes from, and how work becomes meaningful, or mechanisms that foster meaning making. While the meta-analysis discussed above explores sources of meaning and mechanisms that foster meaning as separate constructs (Rosso et al., 2010), this study finds the two to be inextricably linked. A source of meaning making at work, such as the self, others, or the overall context, greatly influences the mechanisms through which meaning is made, such as the frustrated or empowered mindsets. This influence occurs in both directions – mechanisms of meaning making illuminate the relative importance, or lack thereof, of a particular source of meaning. Consequently, instead of presenting the findings in a quadrant-like structure as is depicted in the meta-analysis (Rosso, et al., 2010), the theoretical model for this study places the sources of meaning and the mechanisms that foster meaning on top of one another. While it makes for a more visually complex illustration, that complexity is necessary in order to more accurately depict the intersections and symbiotic nature of the component parts of the model itself.

While the model depicts this developmental process from left-to-right in a somewhat linear fashion, given the number of arrows pointed in that direction, the meaning making process experienced by participants is in fact cyclical, as represented by the large red arrow at the top. Though participants in the study did, generally speaking, arrive at an empowered, self-constructed mindset to their approach to student learning outcomes assessment work, all participants spoke of experiences that challenged them to avoid revisiting a frustrated mindset. This illustrates a process that included steps backwards as well as forwards. Moreover, the process of identifying and experiencing the meaning making catalysts in the center of the model was slow, which is represented by the color yellow in the arrows that illustrate that portion of the model. Again, this will become clearer as the words of the participants themselves are brought to light in the following pages.

The developmental process shown in the model also can be understood as occurring through four overlapping lenses of self, team/department, division/institution, and external audiences. These lenses are intended to draw upon Baxter Magolda's (2008) epistemological dimension, intrapersonal dimension, and interpersonal dimension as well as the concept of a meaning making filter described earlier (Abes et al., 2007). As was articulated in the literature review, meaning making is a constructive and individual process, but also recognizes that individuals exist in a large social context beyond themselves. Meaning making is an active and interactive process between the individuals and their social context, and the findings of this study as depicted in its theoretical model

account for the role of the individual, the role of the social context, and the ongoing interaction that sits in between (Dutton et al, 2011; Hall & Mirvis, 1995).

In this sense, the twelve theoretical categories that are presented as components of the model were constructed through and understood by participants among four interlocking lenses, each of which filters through it a unique component of the overall meaning making process. At any given moment, any one of the overlapping filters could be deeper or more permeable, not only illustrating the salience of that filter in the meaning making process, but also the increasing complexity of meaning making in that filter at that moment (Abes et al., 2007). This is the rationale behind the semi-transparent greenish-yellow tint provided to the lenses themselves, as well as the yellow arrows on the left of the lenses and the green arrows on the right. The findings of this study, at least in some ways, mirror the dimensions of multiple identity development (Abes et al., 2007), as the salience, strength, and level of complexity in their thinking participants expressed shifted in different contexts and in relationship to multiple internal and external factors.

Frustrated Mindset

In many respects, the frustrated mindset at the left hand side of the theoretical model that emerged from the findings of this study is characteristic of Kegan's (1994) socialized mind, or his third order of consciousness. The meaning making occurring in this mindset is one in which participants are "subject," to use Kegan's (1994) terminology, to their assumptions about assessing student learning outcomes in their work. Much like Kegan's (1994) socialized mind, the frustrated mindset experienced by

participants of this study expresses their struggle with multiple roles and priorities, competing obligations, and regularly feeling "in over their heads." Moreover, this is experienced without a sense for how to reconcile the competing and often conflicting inputs they felt internally and in relationship to others.

Frustrated was purposefully chosen to synthesizes the theoretical categories and codes represented in this mindset. Derived from the Latin *frustratus* (Harper, 2014), meaning "to deceive, disappoint, or make vain," the findings in this aspect of the study's model represent the tension and cognitive dissonance expressed by participants in seeking to understand contradictory forces. Internally, participants felt a sense of self-deception, as the responsibility for assessing student learning outcomes was in conflict with their prioritization of other administrative identities and job functions. In relationship to peers and colleagues, the behaviors, attitudes, and norms present in the environments of participants resulted in their experiencing ambiguity, defensiveness, and in some cases deceitfulness. Consequently, the responsibility for assessing student learning was initially made meaning of through this initial mindset of frustration.

While ultimately, participants in this study were able to articulate the importance of meaning making catalysts to further their development, all participants described a frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes, from which their development first started. The four theoretical categories that comprise this mindset represent perceptions and structures experienced by participants that hindered and obstructed their development of a more complex understanding of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. Moreover, while the participants would

eventually "have object" (Kegan, 1994) over the perceptions and structures that make up this broader frustrated mindset, each found that day-to-day work experiences could cause them to revisit this mindset, further reflecting Kegan's (1994) recognition that one does not abandon previously held beliefs and understandings in the developmental process. Instead, as will be touched upon later in more detail, the ability of participants to identify and reflect upon experiences that would cause them to revisit this frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes is a crucial component of the transition from subject to object.

Identifying and prioritizing as administrator. The theoretical category that emerged from the analysis of the data that represents the frustrated mindset held internally by participants is identifying and prioritizing as an administrator. Strikingly, in describing their work, participants talked at great length about the staff they supervise, the budgets they oversee, the programs they plan, the committees they sit on, the crises that they encounter, and numerous other administrative tasks that form the foundation of their identity in their work and how they prioritize their responsibilities. This finding is striking because participants, for the most part, did not talk about where student learning assessment and the importance of student learning outcomes in their work until after they were prompted to talk about it. This is perhaps even more noteworthy given the advanced notice that participants had about the purpose of the study and their having been selected to participate in it specifically because they were identified as being superb in their work related to assessing student learning outcomes.

Until being prompted to talk about student learning, participants spoke about their administrative tasks as being their priority and forming the foundation of their work identity. Will, a participant in a student activities position, stated, "student learning can often fall to the wayside, with the focus on operational activities of programs as well as the drive to get people to events." Many participants echoed this notion of student learning "falling to the side." Joan, a residence life professional, in describing the relative importance of assessing student learning outcomes in her work said, "Philosophically, very, but functionally, it doesn't happen very often. I'd say that we would like to, but the reality is that conduct and crisis trumps everything else." Elaine, a learning services practitioner, wrote in one of her journals:

> Over the last four weeks or so, I have honestly spent less time that I would have liked focusing on assessment of student learning. This has been particularly frustrating, as assessment is one of the components of my position that I find most enjoyable. However, other responsibilities have forced my assessment to take a back seat to the more "urgent" priorities of the office.

Like Elaine, most other participants eventually proceeded to speak eloquently and with great vigor about their passion and interest for assessing student learning. However, this passion and interest had to be drawn out from participants, juxtaposed against their frustrated mindset towards it resulting from an identity that is so firmly grounded in an identity of "being in survival mode" or having to manage other "pressing obligations." For participants, identifying as an administrator came to represent nearly all of their responsibilities that could take precedence over assessment work at any moment in any

given day. In this category, participants framed assessing student learning outcomes itself as a separate task, as if it were one option from among a checklist of alternatives for how participants might spend their time in their position. Martie, in residence life, commented, "some of the things around student learning seem to get shuffled behind because there are more important pressing things that have to happen, like follow up to the Dean of Students or providing case management." While this mindset did not go away, as will be articulated later, participants were able to exhibit a more complex form of thinking about the processes and structures that informed their internalized professional work identities.

This finding also relates back to Kreber's (2010) study of identity development and meaning making among higher education faculty. Specifically, Kreber (2010) found that faculty members with an awareness of the call for heightened accountability measures expressed feelings of pressure and tension in relationship to other core academic values. The result of feeling this pressure and tension in their work made it cognitively challenging for faculty to balance their commitments to inspiring intellectual curiosity among their students with an increasing amount of administrative tasks. In this theoretical category, one finds that student affairs professionals experience similar cognitive challenges to their identity development process when increasing responsibilities for assessment first become introduced into their portfolio of job responsibilities. Processes and mechanisms for negotiating these responsibilities will be highlighted in other areas of the model.

Oversimplifying student affairs role and purpose. In relationship to their immediate team or department, participants in the study struggled to move past a

frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning because of the oversimplification of the role and purpose of student affairs work they perceived from others in their work environment. In their day-to-day interactions with colleagues, participants often encountered stereotypes about student affairs work that had a negative impact on their perceptions of assessing student learning. Despite an interest in assessment work, the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of others with whom study participants interacted on a daily basis forced them to call into question the broader purpose of working within student affairs and where, if anywhere, student learning fit into that purpose.

For example, in describing colleagues, Carmen, a professional in alcohol and drug education remarked, "They want to create their programs and services without worrying about whether or not learning is happening as a result of the programs and services or as a part of them." Carmen went on to elaborate, "I am frequently encouraged to engage in flash 'feel-good' programming related to alcohol and other drug prevention. Research in general shows us that these programs are ineffective at best, and counterproductive at worst." Multiple participants articulated this attitude of "programming without worry" as one that caused them frustration. Along these lines, some participants expressed confusion over the perceptions they observed among colleagues, who relayed that assessing student learning in student affairs programs is somehow inconsistent with a general ethos in the field. Wyatt, from an intercultural affairs department, best articulated this finding:

> Somehow this narrative formed, like student affairs are supposed to be places where things are easy, right? I think some of our student affairs culture prides

> ourselves on the fact that we hold, right, and this really oversimplified dichotomy of challenge and support. We're way too far on the support side, and learning is like actively placing people on the struggle path, right? We don't have to be cuddly all the time, right?

What participants seemed to be experiencing in their relationships with peers and colleagues is a dissonance between their belief in the value of assessment and the manner in which colleagues oversimplify the purpose of student affairs as being one that only needs to concern itself with superficial objectives.

This dissonance reflects a tension in the socialization process, as the norms and attitudes expressed by peers in participants' work environment were challenging to integrate into participants' own meaning making and choices (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Maitlis, 2005; Schein, 1971; Thornston & Nardi, 1975; Van Maanen, 1978). As Ashforth and Mael (1989) found in applied social identity theory to their studies of organizational life, socialization "may engender internalization of, and adherence to, group values and norms and homogeneity in attitudes and behaviors" (p. 26). The oversimplification of student affairs work expressed by colleagues and initially experienced by participants can therefore be understood as a process of negotiation between participants' individual expectations and the expectations of others in their environment (Swann et al., 2009), where participants lacked the necessary meaning making capacity for challenging the privileged norms and values that drove the socialization process in their environment. In this category, the environment in which participants existed produced a level of conformity (Collinson, 2003), as the majority of organizational influences on their

meaning making hindered the development of a more complex framing of the purpose of student affairs work and the role of assessing student learning outcomes within that work.

For one participant, Olivia, from a student activities office, this manifested itself in her observations that others around her talk about the importance of assessment, but truly only give lip service to it because of their ongoing reliance upon anecdotal and feel good stories to convey their impact. She remarked, "anecdotal data is not going to cut it moving forward – those feel good stories that we all love, I wonder what's going on there, because not everything can be flowers and all that fun stuff." Experiences and perceptions like these caused participants to receive mixed signals from their colleagues in framing the place and importance of student learning assessment in their work. Regularly interacting with peers for whom assessment and student learning were perceived to be negative or nonessential elements of the work in their department has the unfortunate, though perhaps inevitable consequence, of rubbing off on participants in this study and stifling their own meaning making process around this aspect of their work.

Navigating and negotiating expectations. While a perceived oversimplification of student affairs work at the team or departmental level resulted in a frustrated mindset towards student learning outcomes assessment among study participants, the challenge of navigating and negotiating broader cultural and political expectations in their division and institution also played a role in the development of this mindset. Participants regularly expressed that their divisional and institutional contexts were filled with ambiguity and politics with respect to the importance, or lack of importance, of assessing student learning, the result of which was that participants expressed significant levels of

challenge in evaluating the relative significance of student learning outcomes assessment in relationship to areas of responsibility.

As Brown and Lewis found (2011), knowledge workers, a classification into which student affairs professionals would fall, will be challenged to synthesize multiple and competing influences in their environment, particularly when cultural expectations and processes conflict with personal identities and values. This finding articulates much of what is happening for participants in this category. Their divisional and institutional environments were presenting multiple and often conflicting messages about the value of assessing student learning outcomes, making it difficult to evaluate the relative importance of assessment as a job responsibility in relation to other administrative tasks. This finding also connects to research examined in the literature view regarding organizational cues (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). As stated previously, cues influence the meaning making process by first being noticed or observed, then by being discerned as affirmative or inappropriate, and finally, by the act of following (or not following) the cues in fulfilling execution of the work itself (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Participants in this study were highly observant about the cues they perceived in their environment. However, the cues themselves were difficult to evaluate, and occasionally in conflict, making it difficult to determine which should be considered actionable.

There were numerous subthemes that informed the broader construction of this theoretical category. One of these subthemes was "lacking clear goals." Multiple participants expressed significant uncertainty around whether or not student learning was in fact a goal of their student affairs division, and if so, whether it was truly a goal to

assess it. Martie described, “It’s both time consuming, challenging with getting on the same page, and also making sure it’s relevant to what the institution wants.” Elaine made similar comments, stating, “I’ll just be really honest, our division has not made assessment a priority. Sometimes this idea of not having a clear path from the beginning around assessment has caused me a little bit of anxiety.” Statements such as these embody the intrapersonal and interpersonal tension that exists in the developmental transition from the socialized mind to the self-authored mind (Baxter Magolda; 2008; Kegan, 1994).

Participants were heavily reliant upon their external environment and individuals in that environment to provide guidance and expectations to help them determine what is or is not important. This aspect of the theoretical model reflects recent findings in which nearly 54% of student affairs assessment leaders whose divisions had yet to develop learning outcomes attributed it to lack of clear expectations for doing so, with another 31% citing lack of support from senior leadership as another factor (Center for Study of Student Life, 2015). In this case, the absence of clarity reinforced the frustrated mindset towards student learning outcomes assessment. Most fundamentally, participants were asking themselves, “is there significance in my work and from where should I derive an understanding of that significance if my divisional and institutional environment is not providing clarity?”

Another subtheme of importance in this category was the notion that participants observed a desire for “packaged and neat results” as a component of the politics at play in their environment. Carmen described her experiences in this area by stating, “People

want packaged pretty results. They want things that make sense and they want numbers, you know what I mean. Everybody wants it wrapped up in a neat bow." Participants talked about encountering this type of attitude at all levels of the institution. For some, this created the perception that only positive assessment results mattered; for others, it seemed to exacerbate the lack of complexity that went into executing student learning assessment. While participants did not uniformly experience the impact of their divisional and institutional cultures, perceptions of ambiguity and playing politics with assessment did inform a frustrated mindset.

Justifying role to keep funding and resources. The final theoretical category that emerged as an element of the frustrated mindset were experiences filtered through the external audience lens, and found participants using assessment as a mechanism for justifying their role in an effort to hold on to their funding and resources. Participants perceived a constant awareness for how assessing student learning outcomes was a necessity in order to justify their work and to hang on to precious resources within their department. Consequently, participants experienced student learning assessment, and assessment in general, in a frustrated manner, mindful that external audiences were looking to evaluate their worthiness as a byproduct of assessment results.

Participants in the study were vividly aware of funding challenges at their institution and across the higher education landscape. Subthemes that emerged in this category included "feeling pressure," "being scrutinized," "racing for funding," and "providing evidence for existence." In this sense, participants framed assessment efforts as an exercise in survival. Sasha, from a leadership programs department, commented:

> What are they taking away from the program, event, or conference that they can apply to their life? What is the most important thing that they are learning as a result of their participation with a particular program or leadership role? Those are the types of things we need to know in order to be able to demonstrate why the programs and services that we provide for our students are important, and more significantly, why they are needed.

Similarly, Joan talked about how "people are looking for numbers to show how their program or office adds value and should not be cut, being able to defend the work that we do so we don't lose people or resources." Elaine stated, "There's a lot of pressure externally for us to have data to back up the requests that we're making. We seem to be under a little bit more scrutiny if you will. The need to have data and evidence to back up not only the work that we're doing but the decisions that we're making."

While maintaining funding from external audiences is not inherently bad, its presence in the theoretical model for this study adds to the overall frustrated mindset of participants as a meaningful factor in inhibiting their development towards conceptualizing their student learning outcomes assessment work in a more complex way. The challenge for participants, both in this area and the three theoretical categories that preceded it, were to transform their perceptions, attitudes, values, and emotions from being externally defined to internally driven and integrated. The subsequent two sections of this chapter will explore catalysts that helped facilitated the meaning making process beyond the frustrated mindset and the empowered mindset that emerged.

Meaning Making Catalysts

The next four components of the theoretical model that synthesizes the data collected in this study serve as meaning making catalysts, helping to facilitate growth and development of participants from a frustrated mindset representative of Kegan's socialized mind to an empowered mindset representative of a self-authored mind (1994). The choice of the word "catalysts" to describe these components of the theoretical model is purposeful. Etymologically, catalyst is derived from catalysis, a Latinized form of the Greek "katalysis," and was adopted by Swedish chemist Jons Jakob Berzelius in 1836 to describe a change or dissolution caused by an agent which itself remains unchanged (Harper, 2014). Each of the four theoretical categories that fall under this meaning making catalyst umbrella produced, metaphorically, a dissolution of the frustrated mindset held by participants allowing for the emergence of the empowered mindset. Yet as categories themselves, they remain discrete and separate elements in the overall model.

The notion of a meaning making catalyst draws upon numerous concepts from the literature review presented earlier, such as the "crossroads" (Boes el al., 2010), holding environments (Kegan, 1994), and critical incidents (Landreman et al., 2007). The "crossroads" was defined earlier "as the transitional space between relying upon external formulas and achieving self-authorship" (Boes et al., 2010, p. 12). For participants, the meaning making catalysts they articulated, as will become evident below, existed in this transitional space, or holding environment (Kegan, 1994), between a frustrated mindset and the development of an empowered mindset. Within this transitional space, meaning making catalysts served to spark reflection upon "critical incidents" (Landreman et al.,

2007, p. 292). As stated previously, one study found, "it was the exposure to one or more critical incidents, combined with reflection on the significance and importance of these events, that lead to the revelations or crystallizations of meaning referred to as aha moments" (Landreman et al., 2007, p. 292).

As Smith and Rodgers found (2005), isolated opportunities to build a commitment towards student learning through isolated professional development opportunities in student affairs will likely not produce the intended outcomes without opportunities for ongoing reflection and feedback. Similarly, Helsing et al. (2008) found that feedback on how, when, and for what purpose to use new behaviors and skills was necessary in order for those behaviors and skills to become fully integrated into one's practice. The function of a meaning making catalyst for participants was to both surface an awareness of these critical incidents, and to also provide a mechanism for the necessary reflection to spur continued meaning making about them.

Acknowledging limitations and lack of preparation. The catalyst that aided participants in this study from developing beyond their identity as an administrator was their acknowledging their own limitations and their lack of preparation for assessing student learning outcomes. Participants became aware that assessing student learning was an area of their work in which they were underprepared. Their willingness to commit to improving their competencies in this area was a springboard for their development. The limited training and lack of graduate preparation for assessing student learning that participants expressed aided in maintaining the frustrated mindset towards this area of their work. Not feeling confident with assessment made it easier for participants to

prioritize other aspects of their work where their levels of confidence were higher, and also enabled a mindset of viewing student learning assessment itself as a separate task divorced from other job responsibilities. Recognizing these feelings and being able to articulate them was a catalyst for advancing their meaning making to a higher level.

Graduate preparation, or the absence thereof, was discussed by numerous participants. Wyatt, for example, stated:

> To recognize, I'm trying to do something that I wasn't trained to do, or wasn't prioritized in my own curriculum, so I've just spent a lot of time thinking about that with my peers, all of the diverse disciplines that we come from that just never explicitly prepared us with some of the core skills to do this work.

This quote truly illuminates this category, as it represents both the lack of training but also recognition of this challenge, and the processing and reflecting Wyatt was doing to make sense of these challenges in his work. Will made a similar statement, suggesting, "I wonder a lot of times about, with assessment, or that kind of stuff, how much are we lacking in the technical and practical competency to get things done like that?" Here again, participants are identifying their limitations for assessment but also articulating their reflective processing about it.

Similarly, participants spoke of a general lack of confidence in assessing student learning, independent of any graduate program training or other skill building opportunity. Carmen stated, "Just that sense of being an imposter – I was so afraid I was doing something wrong that I didn't want to find out whether I was doing anything right." Feeling insecure and fraudulent, as Carmen suggests in this quote, prevented her

from wanting to engage in assessment work out of an anxiety that her general efficacy as a professional would be questioned. Sasha described her feelings as being "overwhelming at different points in time, if you look at it altogether and think, my gosh, I've got to be some expert, but I'm not." There is the perception that being an expert at measuring student learning outcomes assessment was a prerequisite for not feeling overwhelmed when executing it.

However, despite the recognition that they lacked adequate preparation and felt insecure in their assessment abilities, participants talked about slowly developing their competence and confidence over time. Martie described her perspective as, "It's something that I don't feel confident in, that I am constantly seeking out resources to improve my understanding of it and thinking about how I can think about it differently." Her lack of confidence is something of which she is aware, but at the same time, she is willing to acknowledge it and identify opportunities to improve. Recognizing her growth in the area of assessment, Olivia discussed, "putting an evaluation together, sometimes I can get done in a very short period of time, versus when I first started it would have taken a lot longer." Offering another strategy, Elaine mentioned, "When I'm at a conference, I try to find one session, one something on assessment that I don't know anything about and just use that as a means and an opportunity to develop my skills a bit further." Identifying, acknowledging, and taking action to address one's limitations in assessing student learning outcomes served to catalyze participants' internal thinking and development of their identity with this aspect of their work, resulting in movement towards an empowered mindset that will be discussed later.

Pausing and gaining focus. The second theoretical category that emerged from my data analysis as a meaning making catalyst was the category of pausing and gaining focus. In their relationships with colleagues on their team and in their department, participants took an iterative and incremental approach towards building student learning outcomes assessment efforts, determined to focus on executing a small number of projects in which they would assess learning on a deeper level. This permission to hit the pause button, whether it was granted by themselves or by a colleague, allowed participants to reflect with their staffs on the purpose of their work and dissolve the oversimplification of their responsibilities that was occurring in the frustrated mindset. This category manifested itself, predominantly, in three ways. First, participants expressed a need to temporarily stop and evaluate their work, both with respect to assessment and their other responsibilities. Second, participants articulated the opportunity to stop and the process of gaining focus that occurred when pressing the pause button, allowing them to reflect on the content and purpose of their work in conversations with colleagues. Lastly, participants moved themselves and their teams onto a scalable, intentional, incremental path towards building a sustainable plan and infrastructure for executing student learning assessment with a focus on quality.

One of the more explicit pieces of data reflecting the mindset of hitting the pause button came from Wyatt, who remarked, “My first request to all my colleagues was to stop. Even though nobody really knew what they were doing, everybody was measuring everything.” Will made similar comments, stating, “One of the things that I talk about a lot with our department is assessing things just for assessing purposes is not really where

we need to be." Similarly, Elizabeth, from a student union programs department, described a conversation with her staff by recalling, "It was beneficial because we really tightened our belts, we really thought about what we were doing and what we hoped to gain by the programs and what the students should gain." Carmen, in discussing a conversation she was having with a peer in her department, recounted challenging her colleague to think more critically about her work and the need for assessment to be a part of it, stating, "If it's (assessment) not, then why are you wasting your time? I guess it just boils down to something as simple as that to me." These sentiments stand in stark contrast to the "programming without worry" attitude that participants voiced in describing relationships with peers that was discussed in a previous section. They reflect an important transitional aspect of moving beyond the frustrated mindset, and specifically, showing the importance of participants giving themselves and others permission to stop and think more critically about their work.

Once participants and the colleagues on their team hit the pause button, it allowed them to gain focus, prompting them to evaluate both what their work should be and the role of assessing student learning outcomes as a component of the work itself. In describing how gaining focus felt for her and her staff, Elizabeth stated, "It's hard to take a deep breath and say, 'I have to do this first so that I can do a meaningful job.'" Leilani, working within a residence life department in a role that is primarily a judicial affairs position, remarked, "I think it provides some good structure to do some checks and balances to make sure that we do what we say we're doing." In this case, Leilani is talking about the process of developing student learning outcomes with her peers as a

means for gaining focus and providing a structure to govern her team's work and its intended results.

Finally, after gaining focus, participants talked about a methodical and incremental process of building a sustainable, planned, and high-quality student learning outcomes assessment practice among their peers. In describing a planning matrix that her team started to use, Elizabeth said:

> It helps to take a step back and organize what you're doing and where you're doing it and when you're collecting it. Then you just look at your matrix and say, 'I'm supposed to be doing XYZ for this reason and that's why I planned it. Here it is and I'm going to do it.' Using a matrix to make sure, to really look at everything we do and make sure we're covering everything that we need.

Many participants talked about using a similar planning or mapping technique with their teams to articulate the goal and assessment plan for their departmental activities. Elaine stated, "what do we want students to learn as they engage in each individual program" is a question that her office asks in organizing their work. Similarly, Olivia commented, "we've identified learning outcomes for each area of our office, for our overall program and then mapped those back to each individual session." However, beyond creating plans and matrices to guide their work, participants talked about developing high-quality and sustainable practices for assessing student learning. Olivia stated, "Being able to talk through, scale back, and prioritize has allowed us to have more robust assessment work rather than just tons of it." Similarly, Wyatt mentioned, "Let's learn by doing something small and manageable and digestible and grow off of that. Something that we can do that

can be sustainable." Ultimately, taking a pause and gaining focus allowed participants to reframe the frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes that they experienced in relationship with their peers, catalyzing a new perspective in which high-quality, meaningful, and sustainable assessment efforts were prioritized.

Receiving critical feedback and support. At the divisional and institutional level, navigating ambiguous cultural expectations and murky political situations resulted in participants expressing a frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes. By comparison, critical feedback and support served as a catalyst to developing past the frustrated mindset and towards an empowered mindset. In this theoretical category, participants regularly discussed the importance of receiving feedback from peers at their institution, and in many cases developed a mentoring relationship with the divisional director of assessment. Participants expressed feelings of being supported in the challenges they faced in assessing student learning, and felt comfortable discussing ideas with colleagues as a result of support in their greater organizational environment.

This category of the theoretical model links back to Ibarra's (1999) notion of provisional selves. Receiving critical feedback and support allowed participants to experiment and "make corrective adjustments to their action strategies so they could eventually reduce discrepancies among their private self-conceptions, the behaviors that define a successful role performance, and the images they project in public as they perform the role" (Ibarra, 1999, p. 799). What they were able to observe in their colleagues, including their divisional director of assessment, served as a catalyst for

prototyping various strategies for making meaning of their student learning outcomes assessment work. This category of observing others, receiving feedback from peers, and engaging in self-reflection, represents a transitional space between the frustrated mindset and the empowered mindset that would emerge later.

What made receiving feedback a catalyst for participants was that it was critical and developmentally oriented. For example, Wyatt described a peer-to-peer inter-unit feedback process to give staff the opportunity to have their assessment plans critiqued and strengthened. He said,

> We've created this structure where we investigate each other, and of course that comes with learning about your own unit, but largely, colleagues come in and say 'Wyatt, we've looked over your work, and here's the gaps, here's the strengths, here's all of that.' That's been super helpful.

Carmen talked about how in her division they have started to "do peer reviews of others' assessment reports, and that's been super helpful," in improving her confidence in creating techniques for sharing outcomes data. Similarly, despite expressing feelings of isolation in his division because of his interest in assessment, Will wrote in a journal entry about an opportunity to come together with colleagues and offer guidance on how they can improve their work. Will described this experience by writing, "Connecting with like-minded people trying to improve their assessments was one of the few times I've really felt like I was on the same team." This category is an extension of previously discussed studies that illustrated that assessment coaching and mentoring can help staff

overcome negative attitudes or mental barriers towards assessment responsibilities (Hodes, 2009; Slager & Oaks, 2013).

One form of critical feedback came from assessment teams or committees that existed at participants' institutions. Martie, for example, said, "We're learning about the assessment strategies that each of the other areas is working on and how we can collaborate or implement something similar. Having that consistent group that met to discuss assessment plans was helpful." Olivia offered a similar perspective in describing the role of such a group in her division:

> Finding some folks who you can talk with, bounce ideas off of, has been really important for me. Finding someone that really...that enjoys doing this work that you can talk through about different assessment strategies or questions that you have developed, someone that can look at some of the plans that you have an be able to give you some critical feedback.

While these committees, teams, and peer feedback processes existed in an environment in which the frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning was present and strongly perceived, participants were able to use these experiences with colleagues to expand their thinking, skills, and perspective regarding assessment work.

In several cases, a director of assessment for the student affairs division was mentioned as providing mentorship, or shaping the tone and culture that made receiving critical feedback and support possible. Sasha stated, "She [the assessment director] is extremely supportive and I love that she gets excited about the work that my team is doing in regards to student learning outcomes. It makes the effort that my team is putting

into the process feel valued and important." Martie articulated that her divisional assessment director "challenges me when I think about things in a certain way – he challenges me to make sure that I'm thinking really broadly about student learning." While some participants were in a division of student affairs where the position had recently been established, or the individual filling it had been recently hired, the assessment director role contributed to the feedback and support process, both by offering it themselves, but also by setting the tone for the large organization.

Connecting to academics, mission, and theory. The final theoretical category that emerged from the data as a meaning making catalyst was the understandings that participants expressed connecting their work in assessing student learning outcomes to a wider range of external factors beyond their division. These factors included things such as the academic experience of their students, the mission of their institution, or theory and standards within the field. For participants, these ideas and principles emerged as forces for their own development, helping to break down a mindset that viewed assessing student learning as solely being necessary to justify the existence of their work and maintain funding. As Cutler (2003) found, being asked to intentionally link theory with one's practice is desired by student affairs professionals to aid in their growth and development. While being asked to link theory with practice was not expressed by participants, they did speak about making these linkages on their own.

Some participants framed their work in assessing student learning outcomes as a mechanism for articulating their place in fostering student learning alongside the academic experience facilitated by faculty. For example, Elizabeth said, "That is part of

the goal, so I will know which data I'm going to be collecting that I might use for external audiences. But I'll also do it in that case to tell our academic partners our role in the mission here, in educating students." However, also of interest was how some participants utilized learning outcomes and evaluation processes that were already in place on the academic affairs side of their institution as a mechanism for developing their own assessment efforts. Olivia stated:

> We started with our principles of undergraduate learning and added two more outcomes that we felt were present in our student affairs programs that were missing. We then used some course evaluation questions to get us started in terms of how do we ask about critical thinking, for example, on an assessment.

In this sense, assessing student learning outcomes was both an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance of student affairs work to the academic goals of the institution, but also to pull from existing practices and models for evaluating learning from within an institution's academic affairs environment.

Some participants went a step further in talking about the connection between their assessment practices and their institutional mission. For Carmen, accessibility is a core component of her institutional mission, and she described her assessment practices as a means for evaluating her department's contribution to that mission. She said, "I feel like we need to make sure that our programs and services are accessible to all of our students and that they are well-suited to the mission of our institution." Similarly, Martie, whose institution has service to the community as a core element of its mission, stated, "that's what the mission of our institution is founded on," suggesting her responsibility to

assess the extent to which students learn and internalize that value of service to the community through participation in her department's programs.

Lastly, some participants connected their work in assessing student learning to broader theories, rubrics, or standards within higher education. Leilani mentioned the AAC&U VALUE rubrics as a document that informed her development of student learning outcomes for her office. Elaine talked about the growing importance of using CAS standards within her department and her division. More broadly, Wyatt talked about using theory as a foundation for his student learning assessment practices. He stated:

> Theoretically grounded is important to me - not that there's a theory for everything we want to teach, as there are many abstract and deep limitations to theory, but at least it's a launching point, a place to begin to show that we've considered the literature that came before us, the larger schools of thought that are out there.

The broader theoretical category of connecting to academics, mission, and theory, was a catalyst for participants transitioning from a frustrated mindset to an empowered mindset. Utilizing these elements from their external audience to reframe their student learning assessment work allowed participants to move beyond the perspective of assessment being a mechanism for justifying their existence to a means for seeking improvement and autonomy. The empowered mindset and its four theoretical categories will be discussed in the following section.

Empowered Mindset

The meaning making catalysts described in the previous section facilitated the growth and development of participants from the frustrated mindset to the empowered mindset side of the theoretical model that emerged from this study's data collection and analysis. In the empowered mindset, represented by the four categories to be discussed below, participants expressed perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of confidence and ownership regarding their student learning outcomes assessment responsibilities. Moreover, in moving into an empowered mindset, the lines between facilitating programs and activities that would contribute to student learning and assessing student learning blurred substantially.

In slight contrast to the findings of Rosso et al. (2010), participants in this study did not frame the mechanisms for meaning making in the empowered mindset in terms of achieving individual agency on the one hand, or gaining communion with their colleagues on the other. Instead, achieving agency and gaining community with colleagues had a reciprocal and symbiotic interaction in the empowered mindset. For example, establishing one's primary identity as an educator or teacher was not separate from one's processes for addressing and reframing fear. While these two categories are presented separately, largely because they are filtered through different lenses (the first being internal and the second being external), both exist within an overall mindset in which the first contributes to the second and vice versa. As would be expected of individuals moving into a self-authored level of consciousness, the pursuit of agency and the pursuit of community blend and become mutually reinforcing.

In many ways, the empowered mindset also reflects the findings of Baxter Magolda (2008) and the concepts of trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments. As will become evident, participants in the study came to realize that events occurring around them may have been beyond their control, but they nevertheless had the agency to own and determine their reactions to and perceptions of these events. This involved an interactive process occurring internally and relationship to those around them. These participants "reflect on how they had organized themselves and their lives and rearranged as necessary to align arenas of their lives with their internal voices" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280).

In the frustrated mindset, executing the student affairs programs and services for which participants in this study were responsible was a process conceptualized as discrete tasks. However, in the empowered mindset, the cognitive compartmentalization of job responsibilities eroded. The movement from the frustrated mindset to the empowered mindset is reflective of Kegan's (1994) transition to a higher order of consciousness in which the integration of one's perceptions, ideas, and beliefs that were once outside the self as subject become transformed to be internally defined as object. As will become evident in the sections to follow, participants framed student learning outcomes assessment in the empowered mindset as an integrated, essential, and foundational component of the delivery of any program or service for which they were responsible.

Identifying first as curious teacher/educator. The theoretical category that encompasses the empowered mindset through the lens of the self suggests that participants came to adopt an identity as a teacher or educator, with a curiosity to better

understand the learning of their students. In stark contrast to the category of identifying an administrator in the frustrated mindset, in the empowered mindset, participants embedded student learning and their curiosity to assess it into their practices and their identity. Carmen very simply and poignantly stated, "It is actually fully integrated into the programming experience, and therefore it doesn't become something 'other,' but rather, it just 'is.'"

This finding intersects with Renn and Hodges' (2007) study of entry-level professionals in student affairs, which found that gaining confidence and a personal voice in one's work contributed to the development of one's professional identity. While this connection will be revisited in greater detail in a subsequent section, it is worth reiterating at this point that participants in this study were mid-level professionals, all of whom had five or more years of experience in the field. A finding that participants struggled to gain their confidence, voice, and professional identity with respect to assessing student learning outcomes in their position until much later in their professional lives, and only after engaging in a substantial degree of cognitive development, is significant.

Participants framed their curiosity by using language of solving a mystery, piecing together a puzzle, and a general attitude of playfulness and enjoyment with many aspects of their assessment work, but they were largely directed by an internal drive to make an educational impact on their students. Leilani described her interest in assessing student learning by suggesting, "I like looking at those kinds of things. I kind of use it as a mystery...oooh, what is it going to tell us?" Similarly, Elaine talked about feeling

"extremely motivated to get to the end and figuring it out and piecing together that puzzle." More explicitly, Elizabeth simply stated, "I love it. I'm always willing to look at anyone's data and play with it. Anything to spark my curiosity." The transition beyond acknowledging their limitations and lack of preparation to execute student learning assessment work resulted in feelings of passion, excitement, and even fun. However, this attitude towards assessment responsibilities did not emerge in isolation from a greater purpose. Instead, the positive emotions brought about by framing student learning outcomes assessment in the empowered mindset were linked to participants' ability to articulate their core professional identity as an educator or teacher.

Several participants talked about how assessing student learning gives them a sense of pride and purpose. Olivia stated, "I love to analyze data because of what our students are learning. It just makes me grateful and proud to be a part of the profession that I'm in." Sasha wrote in one of her journal entries, "Seeing growth in others is powerful, and I am grateful to be a part of that journey." Will, in talking about a rubric he created and implemented during the course of the study, wrote in a journal, "those are the moments that I feel are worthwhile, the moments where I feel like an educator." As was articulated in the literature review, work that can be perceived as contributing to some higher social purpose and having a positive impact on others can lead to higher levels of meaning making about the work itself (Rosso et al., 2010). In a sense, the empowered mindset allowed participants to think about their day-to-day activities, programs, or services, less as transactional exchanges with their students, but as an instrumental force for bringing out their own desire to foster learning and be an educator or teacher.

Moreover, these positive emotions and sense of greater purpose behind assessing student learning allowed participants to reframe the overall picture of their work in identifying as an educator or teacher, which was at the center of meeting their responsibilities. The practical result of this reframing, developing, and articulating their identity as first being an educator or teacher, was that student learning assessment became an embedded and integrated element of all aspects of their work. Carmen said:

> I don't start something without thinking about how it can be assessed. When it becomes part of your daily work, it just becomes something you do. It's hard to break it out, because it feels like it is so much engrained in what we do, so when I think about programming I don't necessarily separate the two [assessment and programming].

In one of her journal entries, Leilani wrote, "I identify as an educator every single day. Whether it is in a conversation with a student about their decision making and the impact those decisions had on the rest of their residential community, to meeting with those I supervise, I am educating." Similarly, in succinctly summarizing his mindset, Wyatt stated, "What we do is teaching and who we work with are learners." While not all participants were able to articulate having the identity of a teacher or of an educator as clearly, all participants did strongly express a degree of curiosity and passion for facilitating learning among their students. Ultimately, this curiosity connected to the development of an empowered mindset for framing the assessment of student learning as an integrated and embedded responsibility in the broader picture of gaining a sense of pride in being an educator or teacher.

Addressing and reframing resistance and fear. As a corollary to developing an empowered mindset through the lens of the self, participants were also able to reframe their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes in relationship to their peers and colleagues in their team or department. The meaning making catalyst of pausing and gaining focus allowed participants to reframe resistance and fear towards assessment and transition beyond the oversimplification of student affairs work that existed in the frustrated mindset. The process of pausing and gaining focus allowed participants to highlight that the oversimplification of student affairs work that they experienced in relationship to their team or department was largely driven by a fear of assessment. Instead of allowing this fear to linger among their team without being discussed, participants chose to address it as an opportunity to demystify assessment and overcome resistance towards it.

A significant first step in addressing and reframing fear among their team and departmental colleagues was participants' ability to simplify an understanding of assessment. Summarizing a recent dialog with his team, Wyatt stated:

> Assessment, the more and more I get involved, the less and less impressed I am with it. It's just a fancy word for thinking about what you're doing. I think everyone can sign on to that, right? How do we reframe for them the idea that it's deeply embedded in everything we do?

Joan also commented, "It's not that scary. I think that the words learning outcomes and assessment intimidate a lot of people, so taking away that fear of what learning outcomes and assessment means. It's likely stuff they are already doing, they just don't understand

that it's what they're doing." Elizabeth commented, "People are always afraid that you're going to critique them with assessment, that it's going to be a negative thing, but I always go in to my conversation with it's not about that, you've all done great things, but you haven't been able to express it." Building upon the catalytic force of pausing, gaining focus, and committing to do fewer but higher quality assessments, participants in the empowered mindset chose to address the fear towards assessment they felt around them by demystifying assessment as a normal practice that was already, to some degree, happening within their team and department.

Beyond demystifying assessment, participants addressed and reframed fear and resistance towards student learning outcomes assessment by actively encouraging those around them to see their work through a more complex lens. Sasha said:

> If something is not working, don't be afraid to assess that and determine what needs to happen in order for whatever it is you're working on to make sense and to be what you need it to be, what your team needs, and what the students need.

In very similar terms, Carmen stated:

> Set aside your ego. Sometimes what you find is what you chose to do didn't work. Approach it with an open mind. I feel like sometimes we don't want to assess things because we don't want to know what we've done for the past five years is not working.

Once participants came to realize that they did not need to assess everything, and that they could slow down and determine what they truly need to assess with a high degree of quality, it allowed them to more clearly articulate to those around them the importance of

actively seeking out an understanding of what is and what is not working in their department. Thus, in the empowered mindset, fear regarding not knowing how to assess student learning or anxiety regarding bad results from what one might find in doing so presented participants an opportunity to engage in dialogue with those on their teams and move past the oversimplification of student affairs work that existed in the frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning.

Developing mastery to model for and teach others. Looking through the filter of the division and institution, receiving critical feedback and support catalyzed the meaning making of participants to move from a mindset in which they were struggling to navigate expectations and politics regarding assessment responsibilities to a mindset where they sought to develop mastery over it. Participants viewed the lack of clarity that they felt within their larger division and institution about the role and importance of student learning assessment as something over which they could assume ownership. The feedback and support of peers, assessment committees, and divisional assessment directors helped advance their own growth in developing a greater level of mastery and competency in performing assessment work, which resulted in their capacity to model for and teach others.

One way in which participants expressed their development of mastery for assessing student learning outcomes was by conveying their use of multiple methods and techniques for data measurement, collection, and analysis. Will commented on how he has been using his free tuition credits at his institution to proactively take statistics classes to improve his expertise with quantitative analysis. Additionally, most participants

articulated the need to increasingly cultivate direct measures for assessing student learning to supplement a general over-reliance on indirect or self-reported measures. Elaine stated, "doing some sort of direct assessment has been a kind of hurdle that we are still trying to overcome, so we look at a lot of different measures within the office to try and tell a holistic measure of what's going on." Wyatt echoed this challenge in his division stating, "By and large, many of the tools we're using in student affairs are self-reported students' concepts of their own knowledge and their own learning, and we kind of need more."

Some participants offered specific strategies that they had developed in collaboration with colleagues to expand efforts to capture direct measures of student learning. Elizabeth talked about how she had worked with others in her division to develop a rubric that staff would use at various events to lead discussions with participants to engage in "deeper conversations" about using their reflections. Olivia talked about how she's led an effort to encourage "some of our student leaders involved to observe those kinds of pieces," meaning direct measures of learning among their peers. Sasha mentioned an array of different efforts to capture direct measurements, using a different approach to match the structure and duration of the program or activity, stating:

> We do journals, we have papers, they have group projects, they have individual projects. At the end of the year we have a vision project. Sometimes, we'll be as simple as sending around a note card to ask about a key takeaway from a guest speaker, so a simple thing that we can score using a rubric later on.

Despite greater strides being made in this area, Carmen expressed a frustration echoed by many participants suggesting:

> But at a certain point you rely on self-reported data or sometimes you rely on anecdotal information, or sometimes you rely on your observations of the person, but that doesn't provide you with the breadth and depth of the experiences that they're actually having.

Although these statements could be perceived to be somewhat pessimistic, they ultimately reflect a greater level of mastery by participants, as they show an awareness of the need to have better data from multiple sources to demonstrate direct measures of student learning. Instead of continuing to rely upon anecdotal or self-reported data, participants leveraged the feedback and support they received from peers and colleagues within their division to strengthen their assessment efforts. The fact that they are yet to be fully satisfied with where they are in that process represents a strong sense of empowerment and ownership over it.

Participants not only were able to develop this awareness and mastery themselves, but in doing so were often consulted to facilitate growth among others as a model for assessing student learning in their division or institution. In some ways, this should not be surprising, given that a colleague at their institution who finds their work in this area to be superb nominated participants for this study in the first place. However, being a model and serving as a teacher to others represents a critical milestone along a developmental path that started with anxiety, confusion, and a general lack of training, making it a substantial theme to emerge from the data.

Several quotes from participants bring this theme further to life. Carmen, serving as a teacher to others at her institution, talked about how she "has a rubric to help other people to know what they should be doing when developing a learning outcome." Similarly, in one of his journal entries, Will reflected, "An experience that stands out is being asked to teach on the student learning rubrics I created, which shows that they recognize my interest and aptitude and want to work on making our division better at assessment." Joan stated, "they look to me when it comes to assessment needs and understanding data and that kind of stuff." Elaine stated, "we are kind of in the lead in the division so to speak, in terms of assessment, we're one of the offices that is actually doing systematic assessment. We're collecting data that is more than just usage information." Lastly, in one of her journal entries, Olivia wrote about a "roadshow" that she was giving three times in the coming weeks to others in her division about how her office has developed a culture of assessment.

Like the other themes discussed as a part of the empowered mindset to this point, developing mastery and serving as a model and teacher for others resulted from a meaning making catalyst to enable greater development among participants. Receiving critical feedback and support from peers and colleagues helped to dissolve the anxiety and pressure to navigate unclear expectations and politics surrounding student learning outcomes assessment within one's division. Participants used this feedback and support to continue to ask questions, be reflective, expand their own mastery and competence in this area, and ultimately, became seen as a model and a teacher for others. While participants acknowledged they had more to learn about assessing student learning

outcomes, their ability to recognize the need to institute more sophisticated practices for collecting direct measurements using multiple techniques and their willingness to guide others in their division to make similar improvements represents a true sense of empowerment in this area of one's work.

Seeking improvement and autonomy through sharing results. The final component of the empowered mindset is a category that stands in stark contrast to the frustrated mindset of conceptualizing assessment as a practice solely for justifying one's role and maintaining one's level of funding. Instead, participants in this category talked about using student learning outcomes assessment to engage in continuous improvement and gain greater autonomy in their work by sharing assessment results with their broader community. The meaning making catalyst of connecting to academics, mission, and theory enabled participants to reframe assessment as a developmental and transformational element of their practice, and not simply an exercise in compliance or accountability. Alternatively, student learning became viewed through a much broader lens of internal and external factors that resulted in participants thinking about their assessment practices in a forward-looking manner.

All participants meaningfully expressed some aspect of this category, viewing assessment of student learning as a means by which they could determine the effectiveness of their programs and services and establish benchmarks for future improvement. Carmen stated, "My impression about assessment, and the reason why I find it so important is because it tells us if what we're doing is working, so why wouldn't you do it, why wouldn't you do assessment to find out whether or not your efforts are

actually producing anything?" Elaine talked about her motivations, saying, "We have a staff that is constantly striving to improve the work that we do. For us, having the data to back up these decisions that we're making and why we made this change as opposed to that change, why we said yes to this project and no to that one, has been a motivator for us." Along these same lines, Leilani talked about "as long as we made those adjustments, and the only way we know that we need to make those adjustments is when we have the data in front of us." These are just a few examples illustrating participants' desire to use assessment data to strengthen student learning in their programs and services.

Moreover, participants did not just use their assessment results to improve their practices for facilitating student learning. They also were committed to sharing their results, good or bad, to take greater ownership of the future direction of their work. In the frustrated mindset, assessment was framed by participants as a means to *not lose* control, whereas in the empowered mindset, assessment is conceived of as a practice in *gaining* autonomy and control. Even in sharing troublesome findings, relaying them with a focus on using data for making improvement can be empowering. For example, Carmen talked about how an assessment effort she had conducted resulted in only 12% of students being impacted by a high-risk messaging campaign on her campus. While this was a much lower number than desired, her attitude towards it was "so we need to think about how do we reach the other 88%?" In sharing this information, Carmen signals an expertise, tied to specific data, about why an intervention is not working. Consequently, she gains autonomy for framing how to reach the remaining 88% of students who were not reached by the initial intervention.

Wyatt frames this in more conceptual terms removed from any specific example, asking:

> How do we head them off at the pass and tell our story and create our own methods in a way that is right and true for us before we're told specifically how to do it? Because it's coming. Increasingly, there is less and less autonomy in how it's going to get done, but we can build a culture and build an infrastructure so that when they come looking we've already got all these things and we've chosen methods that are culturally appropriate for our community.

Sasha shares a similar sentiment, stating, "Somewhere, someone else is making time and is going to tell you what's important, so why not make the time so that you can share with people what's important and why?" Both of these quotations provide evidence of participants actively seeking to give shape and definition to their own assessment practices with the purpose of gaining autonomy and independence in their work. This sentiment represents a clear shift from the reactivity of the frustrated mindset to a forward-looking approach in which participants assume ownership over their efforts to facilitate and assess student learning in an empowered mindset. Drawing upon Kegan (1994) once more, in this category, participants have grown their thinking, and instead of failing to meet the demands of the "curriculum" of their work environment, they are actively seeking to define it, illustrating a true movement towards "having object" and progressing to a higher level of development.

The Challenge of Not Revisiting the Frustrated Mindset

Despite the growth and development illustrated by the movement of participants from a frustrated mindset to an empowered mindset, the member checking process illuminated that participants did not go without challenges in revisiting the frustrated mindset. As Olivia stated in our second interview, "There will always be those pieces on the left to work through." The model resulting from this study captures the cyclical nature of this learning and development process, and before summarizing the findings from the study it is necessary to describe the challenges faced by participants to maintain their empowered mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes. This challenge is not particularly surprising, given that ways of thinking are never truly abandoned as one progresses to a higher order of consciousness (Kegan, 1994), but it is important to consider ways in which this challenge presents itself in the experiences of participants.

While most participants were able to develop and internalize the identity of a curious educator or teacher, that did not mean that participants never revisited the frustrated mindset of identifying first as an administrator in which student learning responsibilities were separate discrete tasks that could be skipped over or omitted entirely. Sasha said, "When you've got so many other things going on, it can be one of the first to go." In our second interview, Olivia said:

> I still have to be intentional about creating the time and space for it, because when I have to deal with a crisis with one of our student organizations, or with our fraternities and sororities, that takes precedence over some of those activities that are important but aren't necessarily urgent.

Playfully, Wyatt reflected on this aspect of the preliminary findings of the study during our second conversation and stated:

> Right now, I feel that the only time I have...it's like shopping...I only have time to run in the store and grab exactly what I need and hit the self-checkout and get the hell out of there, versus take a big cart and go aisle by aisle and really figure out what's available to me. So I would love some time to just go shopping in that way. Right now it's just bread, milk, eggs, and cheese.

Thus, while most participants arrived at a mindset where integrating their identity as a curious educator regularly informed their meaning making process, remaining in that mindset continued to come up against day-to-day challenges of putting out unanticipated crises that seem to come along as an inevitable aspect of the position for most mid-level student affairs professionals.

Additionally, while participants in the empowered orientation were able to directly and intentionally address fear and resistance towards assessing student learning within their team or department, many participants talked about coming to realize that they were still likely to avoid those opportunities in some circumstances. In reflecting on what she became aware of as a result of her journaling, Joan said, “I realized that there were opportunities to talk about it with others, and I realized that I wasn’t. I had heightened awareness of when I was and wasn’t talking about assessing student learning, which isn’t something that I had paid attention to before.” More explicitly, Will stated, “I personally struggle with having to convince people that looking at their work critically is a good idea.” Consequently, participants were still susceptible to allowing those around

them to oversimplify the purpose and role of student affairs work in their environment. Carmen said, that on occasion, "It's still sort of the tail wagging the dog for some programs. For some things we do programming and we ask ourselves what we think our students learned." These statements illustrate that participants still do not engage in every opportunity they could have to address the oversimplification of student affairs work that they perceived, and not every opportunity to address and reframe fear and resistance was taken.

Similarly, although participants had started to develop mastery in their abilities to assess student learning outcomes and leveraged that mastery to teach others in their division or institution how to do it, there were still moments when participants struggled to navigate a political situation among colleagues. In our second interview, Elaine described how she "continues to encounter people within our division who are resistant to the culture of evidence and the culture of assessment that we're trying to build. Some offices still don't know what that's supposed to look like for their area." Similarly, Leilani suggested, "Sometimes you might have really motivated individuals, but sometimes the institution isn't ready for it and isn't ready to support their motivations." Instead of recognizing that the mastery they had begun to develop presented them with an opportunity to offer critical feedback and support to their peers that they themselves had benefited from, participants opted out of fostering the development of colleagues when these ambiguous or politically sensitive moments arose.

Lastly, even though participants in the empowered orientation were able to frame their assessment of student learning towards a mindset of continuous self-improvement,

they were not completely able to abandon the notion that assessment was also needed to justify their existence and maintain funding sources. Olivia reflected, "Are we really trying to articulate where student learning is happening, or am I really just trying to paint a good picture?" Similarly, Wyatt stated, "Our major motivation is quality self-improvement and all that, but that piece of justifying roles to keep funding and resources I think is such an environmental factor, that there isn't a level of personal transformation that is going to make that go away." These statements help to illustrate the overall cyclical nature of the theoretical model of this study and the challenges participants faced in not revisiting the frustrated mindset.

Summary

The theoretical model presented in this chapter illustrates, to use Kegan's (1994) terminology, a developmental and constructed process in which the complexity of consciousness of participants evolved to frame their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes at a higher order. As the research questions and literature review for the study necessitated, the findings illustrate an overall pattern of meaning making – it's complexity and underlying structure through which experiences are filtered and interpreted (Abes et al., 2007; Boes et al., 2010). To restate Berger's (2010) argument, "It is more than just knowing what *work* you're supposed to do but also knowing what *sense* you're supposed to make out of that work what will help you be effective and satisfied with your job" (p. 155). As the findings illustrate, more complex meaning making by participants did ultimately lead to greater levels of confidence and satisfaction with their student learning outcomes assessment responsibilities.

Participants filter their perceptions, attitudes, believes, observations, and relationships through four overlapping filters of the self, team/department, division/institution, and external audiences. Through each filter, assessment of student learning was constructed and understood with either a frustrated mindset, an empowered mindset, or as a catalyst for making meaning in the transitional space in between the two mindsets. While participants were able to utilize the meaning making catalysts represented in the model to move towards the empowered mindset, as illustrated by the red arrow at the top of the model, participants experienced challenges that saw them occasionally drift back towards the frustrated mindset. The implications for these findings will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

This study explored the process by which mid-level student affairs professionals at colleges and universities make meaning of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. The theoretical model that emerged from the data collected in this study was presented in the previous chapter. This chapter focuses on a broader discussion and interpretation of these findings and the theoretical model. Subsequently, the implications of the study, recommendations for various stakeholder groups for whom the study has relevance, and limitations of the study are also presented.

Discussion

Upon reflection, the three research questions that form the foundation of this study are, in fact, not three separate questions, but are simply three different lenses for framing the same question. The manner in which student affairs professionals make meaning of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes, the structures and processes they use in doing so, and the influence of the organizational/environmental context on those structures and processes, are, as the theoretical findings illustrated, inevitably intertwined. In some respects, this should not be surprising given that the literature review presented in a previous chapter also articulated these intersections. Consequently, a discussion that interpreted the findings of this study by examining each research question separately would be artificial and unwarranted. What follows,

therefore, is a thematic discussion that explores an interpretation of the findings of this study across all of the research questions and the resulting theoretical model presented in the previous chapter.

Moving beyond perceptions of an add-on. One of the more surprising findings from this study stems from the absence of data, or what could be considered negative case analysis. Specifically, when first describing their jobs, participants, even if they included responsibilities for assessment, largely omitted any mention of student learning. Given that participants were recruited for this study because of their identified excellence in assessing student learning outcomes, and knew in advance of the first interview that the focus of the study would be an exploration of that aspect of their work, it is alarming to note that participants failed to mention student learning in descriptions of their roles. While the category of "identifying and prioritizing administrator" captures this finding, a broader interpretation suggests that from a frustrated mindset, at least for participants of this study, work identity was initially defined by the inputs or day-to-day tasks, and not by the intended outcomes of those tasks.

For some participants, this may be the consequence of student learning outcomes assessment falling under the umbrella of "other duties as assigned," which itself may reinforce a perception that it is an add-on to other job functions, and not the foundation upon which all job functions are built. This finding necessitates asking a broader question beyond the theoretical model, which is "is student learning the core responsibility of student affairs professionals and student affairs as a field, and if it is, why is it not recognized as such?" This is a contentious question well outside the scope of this study,

but for these mid-level participants, needing to be asked about the role of assessing student learning in their work is perhaps an indicator of a larger philosophical challenge within the field. However, this finding does reflect a recent study in which the time spent on assessing student learning outcomes within student affairs divisions was only fourth from among seven different types of assessment practices, behind time spent on satisfaction assessment, operational metrics and measures, and needs assessment (Center for Study of Student Life, 2015).

If this finding were only reflected by the meaning making of participants through the lens of the self, it may be of lesser importance. However, the three other categories in the frustrated mindset side of the theoretical model also suggest that student learning and the assessment of learning outcomes in student affairs were deprioritized among colleagues, divisions, and the institutions in which participants worked. These findings reflect the meta analysis by Rosso et al. (2010), suggesting that individuals' motivation to successfully meet their job responsibilities are informed by a combination of intrinsic factors tied to their identity, believes, and values, but also by external socialization forces in the environment. Participants spoke of peers on their teams or in their departments oversimplifying the role and purpose of student affairs work, making it seem as though assessing student learning outcomes was unimportant. At the divisional and institutional level, participants had to navigate ambiguous expectations and tiptoe through political minefields with respect to their assessment of student learning responsibilities, again, reinforcing the ease with which it could be cast-off as an add-on to their work. Lastly, in relationship to external audiences, to the extent that assessment of student learning was

perceived to be important, it was framed as a mechanism for justifying one's work in an effort to hold on to resources. Thus, the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of the frustrated mindset side of the theoretical model aid in explaining the absence of student learning articulated in participants' verbalized descriptions of their work.

Assuming that student learning is the intended outcome of student affairs work, it is a troubling finding that the frustrated mindset may be the starting place for mid-level professionals in making meaning of their assessment responsibilities. The four theoretical categories on the left side of the model each present different obstacles in putting student learning at the heart of student affairs work. The experiences described by participants in this study illustrate that these obstacles are real, persistent, complex, and ultimately create resistance in their own development as professionals. This sense of complexity in mid-level positions has been discussed elsewhere (Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; McClellan, 2012), but the findings of this study illuminate a much higher degree of detail for what this complexity looks like in navigating a specific job responsibility. The categories in the frustrated mindset served as lenses through which the complex responsibility for assessing student learning outcomes was viewed and understood. The resulting picture of that filtering process is one that shows how student learning outcomes assessment is marginalized.

As disheartening as this finding may be, the meaning making catalysts that sit at the center of the theoretical model offer a sense of optimism and hope. While the developmental process may have been a slow one, as illustrated by the yellow arrows, and while participants may have experienced situations that caused them to slip back into

the frustrated mindset, as illustrated by the red arrow, they were able to reach the empowered mindset. The importance of the empowered mindset itself will be discussed next, but first, further consideration to the meaning making catalysts is necessary.

Sparking reflection and growth. As troublesome as the discussion from the previous section may be, the other two areas of the theoretical model that emerged from this study's findings paint a different picture. At the center of the model, the four categories described as meaning making catalysts served to facilitate growth and development in participants' meaning making from the frustrated mindset to the empowered mindset. Just as the categories that influenced a frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes were experienced through the four overlapping filters, catalysts also emerged through each filter. This finding is important because it suggests that the development of mid-level professionals in making meaning of their student learning outcomes assessment responsibilities can be ignited by multiple sources. Mirroring the findings of Helsing et al. (2008), the meaning making catalysts contributed to an iterative and interactive process to provide participants with both exposure to new ideas and feedback about their new behaviors.

Moreover, these catalysts are arguably mutually reinforcing in their impact. Acknowledging one's limitation and lack of preparation for assessing student learning prompted efforts to seek out opportunities to learn from others, as well as normalizing the feelings of risk-taking and experimentation that participants experienced in their own learning process. Mentorship by a director of student affairs assessment or membership on an assessment committee often initiated further reflection about one's limitations and

lack of preparation. This sparked a consultation of the theoretical literature on student learning, and resulted in participants granting themselves permission to pause and gain focus. Previously reviewed research also confirms the role of mentoring opportunities in building assessment competencies among student affairs professionals (Hodes, 2009; Slager & Oaks, 2013). Pausing and gaining focus allowed space for participants to reflect on the feedback they received and support they were receiving, map out a plan for growing their level of competence in assessing student learning, and further establish their perception of this aspect of their work as connected to the academic mission of their institution. Uncovering the importance of CAS standards, the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, and other externally-developed models for assessing student learning helped clarify conversations with mentors and peers, started to reduce feelings of being limited, and offered tools that participants could use to build their assessment practices in phases.

The interactivity between the four meaning making catalysts in the theoretical model is an important finding of this study. The fact that one catalyst, even though participants may have filtered it through a specific lens (such as the self), could spark reflection and development through other lenses (such as the team/department), suggests that opportunities to expose professionals to any of the catalysts could springboard greater proactive exploration around student learning outcomes assessment. However, this is not to proclaim that simple exposure to one of the meaning making catalysts in the model will itself initiate growth and development. To the contrary, the catalysts surfaced a heightened awareness for participants through each of their four filters. It was with this new awareness that participants engaged in self-reflection regarding the frustrated

mindset. Consequently, the impact of self-reflection on the meaning making process of participants in this study is another substantial finding.

To illustrate this further, participants were asked in the second interview about their experience in keeping a journal as a component of the data collection process for the study. For all participants, taking time to write down thoughts related to assessing student learning in their work resulted in learning that they valued and would not have otherwise experienced. For example, Elaine stated, "It was enlightening. There were definitely parts of my experience that I wouldn't have picked up on if I hadn't done it. This is actually very insightful and interesting for me personally and professionally." Will said, "I've enjoyed processing some of this. It's made me reflect more than I would have. It made me step back and think more about what I was doing in the context of student learning and assessment. It encouraged me to take more intentional action to make that more a part of what I do." Lastly, Wyatt articulated, "It was not time that I would normally give myself to think about my work, but it helped my work. It made me think about the urgency of some of the things I needed to talk about with the team." These statements further indicate the importance of participants intentionally processing their experiences related to assessing student learning as a component of moving from the frustrated mindset to the empowered mindset. The implications of this finding will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section.

Becoming and feeling empowered. While the influence of the meaning making catalysts on the growth and development of participants is a prevailing finding, the adoption of the empowered mindset by participants is of even greater significance. A

model illustrating how mid-level professionals in student affairs who are not their division's director of assessment can come to articulate feelings of confidence and ownership over assessing student learning fills a substantial gap in the literature. There is an abundance of literature in student affairs recognizing the deficits most entry and mid-level professionals feel toward conducting assessment work. There are at least a few studies that have explored how to address these deficits from an organizational perspective. However, this study may be the first to uncover a model for how individual mid-level practitioners transition from feeling a deficit and having a frustrated mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes to a sense of confidence and an empowered mindset in fulfilling this portion of their work. While the previous chapter articulated the component parts of the empowered mindset, this section takes a step back to consider its overall significance and broader interpretations.

Addressing the administrator-educator dichotomy. If mid-level student affairs professionals transition into their roles for assessing student learning outcomes with a belief that they are underprepared to fulfill this aspect of their work, the empowered mindset illustrates that there is light at the end of an otherwise complex and confusing tunnel. This finding mirrors the earlier research of Smith and Rodgers (2005), reaffirming that it is a challenge for student affairs professionals to articulate how the mission to facilitate student learning experiences is integrated into their identity and professional practices. The challenge for the field of student affairs, knowing that a positive disposition towards assessing student learning outcomes is possible, becomes building this mindset among a wider array of professionals. Particularly with respect to the

category of identifying first as a curious teacher/educator, this study's findings compel a broader examination within the field of why this aspect of the empowered mindset is not the default developmental starting point for mid-level professionals.

Though the empowered mindset findings are more positive than negative, it is at least somewhat perplexing to see that establishing an identity as an educator is something that needed to happen among participants in this study in order for them to feel empowered towards assessing student learning. Though beyond the scope of this study, this finding begs the question, "is the administrator-educator dichotomy an aspect of one's professional identity development only when considering the assessment of student learning, or is it more broadly experienced across the range of responsibilities for mid-level professionals?" While speculative, it is plausible that the absence of expectations for assessing student learning outcomes in entry-level positions contributes to the perceived fracturing of administrative and educational identities.

Finding self-efficacy. Nevertheless, across the four categories that make up the empowered mindset (identifying first as a curious teacher/educator, addressing and reframing resistance and fear, developing mastery to model for and teach others, and seeking improvement/autonomy through sharing results), evidence of efficacy and self-confidence ties the meaning making processes of participants together. Efficacy is derived from the Latin *efficax* or *efficere*, meaning "powerful, effectual, efficient, to work out or accomplish" (Harper, 2014). This etymological origin illustrates that empowered is truly the right word to capture the mindset of participants on the right side of this study's theoretical model. Whereas on the left side of the model, participants' responsibilities for

student learning outcomes assessment had power over the participants, it is participants who have power over this responsibility on the right side of the model. Yet again, this finding reflects back to the subject-object concept from Kegan (1994), and reflects the challenges individuals in this study faced to navigate and negotiate the demands of the "curriculum" in their present-day work environment.

The developmental nature of the meaning making process reflected in this study's theoretical model underscores the struggle faced by participants to build this sense of self-efficacy, and the red arrow at the top of the model illustrates its tenuous and fragile nature. The broader implication is that reaching the empowered mindset as a mid-level student affairs professional is likely to be a difficult journey. This finding reflects literature reviewed in a previous section, which found that even the most autonomous professionals may be challenged to make sense of and synthesize competing influences from their environment (Brown & Lewis, 2011). However, the concepts reflected by the empowered mindset in this study's theoretical model illustrate what is possible when that journey is successfully navigated and when the destination of having power over one's responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes is reached.

Putting learning first. With this sense of efficacy, participants were able to actively confront and reframe resistance towards assessing student learning that they perceived in their environment. Simply delivering programs and services that leave students feeling satisfied is no longer a benchmark against which participants evaluate themselves and their work within the empowered mindset. The oversimplification of student affairs work that participants confronted served as what Pratt et al. (2006) might

consider a "work-identity integrity violation" (p. 235) or what Landreman et al. (2007) would consider a "critical incident" (p. 292). Having peers in their environment talk about perceiving the work as fostering only feelings of satisfaction among students conflicted with the core work identities of participants. As a result, participants recognized that building the capacity of students to improve their critical thinking, articulate their values and goals, and manage cognitive dissonance when confronted with new ideas should be the primary objectives of their department's programs and services. Focusing on these learning outcomes within a student affairs department is not unique. However, participants believing that the delivery and assessment of experiences that fostered learning outcomes would be the means through which student satisfaction would be achieved is unique. Facilitating challenging learning experiences became the vehicle through which participants believed students would be satisfied with their student affairs experiences.

With the adoption of the empowered mindset came the commitment to provide experiences that would embrace students wrestling with challenges and reflecting upon their struggles in doing so. Will stated, "Part of the learning experience is allowing the student to struggle through a decision while also being there as a voice and resource to help them think through those problems." Framing programs and services in this way would not occur if student satisfaction were the goal. The emergence of the empowered mindset illustrates a shift in the perceptions of participants from viewing their relationships with students as transactional to viewing them as transformational. The challenge that guided participants when viewing their responsibilities from an

empowered mindset was not answering the question, "are students satisfied?" but rather, "what are students learning and how do I know?" The findings of this study have tremendous significance because they reflect a process in which the latter question takes precedence over the former, as well as the tension that participants encountered in making this shift.

From compliance to commitment. The enlightening aspect of this shift in thinking is that, in feeling empowered and framing one's identity as an educator or teacher, assessment of learning becomes a vital and integrated aspect of one's work. Viewing themselves as educators first compelled participants to explore what their students were learning and master multiple methods for how they might assess it. This motivation is what seemed to foster feelings of curiosity, playfulness, excitement, and experimentation towards assessing student learning outcomes. Along these same lines, participants came to realize that they could use their assessment responsibilities to take ownership over and shape the future of their own practices, and not be solely subject to having their work and its execution determined for them by external stakeholders.

Perceived in this way, assessment is no longer an obligation, but instead, it is an opportunity to strengthen the connection between work and values. In the frustrated mindset, participants experienced assessing student learning outcomes as an exercise in compliance. By comparison, in the empowered mindset, these same job responsibilities came to be understood as an aspect of fulfilling one's commitment to the development of one's students. The difference in and transition between these two perspectives is a critical finding for student affairs professionals. Growing a sense of empowerment and

commitment towards work can lead to greater levels of job satisfaction and reduce employee turnover, whereas perceiving one's responsibilities through a lens of compliance is likely to have the opposite effect (Gallup, 2013).

Impacting one's peers and organization. Additionally, the emergence of the empowered mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes among mid-level professionals in student affairs can have residual benefits for others within the organization. The empowered mindset reflects a commitment by participants to practice what they preach among their peers and within their institutions, and is equally as important for their students. Just as student affairs professionals want their students to embrace complexity and think critically, in adopting the empowered mindset towards assessing student learning, participants in this study were able to reframe the fear and resistance they perceived among their peers and address the oversimplification of the purpose of their work that existed in the frustrated mindset. Confronting this resistance presented both an opportunity for individual participants to reaffirm their identity as educators, but also a chance to challenge their peers and colleagues to reimagine the nature of their work.

Though this study did not collect first-hand data from individuals with whom participants worked, the interpersonal and intrapersonal categories that emerged in the theoretical model suggest that the sense of confidence in ownership of assessing student learning that came along with the empowered mindset was something that the participants recognized as informing their relationships with others. This is an important finding because it adds a layer of previously unexamined complexity to the literature on

developing cultures that support assessment in student affairs. The existing literature on this subject argues that leadership from senior student affairs officers who insist on utilizing assessment data to improve programs and services and who create a centrally coordinated assessment committee are key factors in the development of a culture of assessment (Barham & Scott, 2006; Green et al., 2008; Hodes, 2009; Julian, 2013; Kirsky, 2010; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Schuh, 2013). While these practices may be significant, the findings of this study illustrate that the ability for individual professionals to articulate their growth and development may also be important for a broader culture of assessment to germinate within a division of student affairs.

Participants in this study were not only able to articulate catalysts that moved them towards adopting an empowered mindset in this area of their work, but they were able to share that journey and their lessons learned with peers by reframing the resistance of others and by modeling the mastery of assessment practices that they had come to develop. In a sense, the ability and opportunity to share one's journey of development to reaching an empowered mindset can be understood as a bottom-up or grassroots approach to influencing organizational culture or expanding the extent to which student affairs professionals are socialized to perceive student learning outcome assessment as a core component of their work (Maitlis, 2005; Thornston & Nardi, 1975; Van Maanen, 1978; Weick, 1993). Previous studies on socialization in student affairs did not find assessment of learning to be among perceived values in the field (Bureau, 2011; Tull & Medrano, 2008), and consequently, leveraging the meaning making catalysts identified through this study may provide a bottom-up approach to socializing professionals about the

importance of assessing student learning.

This bottom-up approach may have even greater impact than top-down strategies, as hearing the experience of peers who acknowledged their own limitations, navigated unclear expectations, and ultimately were able to frame the responsibility for assessing student learning through an empowered mindset can signal a sense of hope, optimism, and possibility for professionals who may be struggling in this area themselves. Perhaps the best role model for building the capacity of others under these circumstances is not the senior student affairs officer or divisional director of assessment, but the fellow director, associate director, or assistant director whose struggle to make meaning of assessing student learning is more closely aligned with the day-to-day responsibilities of other mid-level professionals.

Reasons to be cautious or concerned. Despite the potential positive nature of this study's findings in surfacing the development of an empowered mindset among its participants, there are, unfortunately, reasons to temper the positive outlook described in previous sections. On the one hand, as was expressed in the previous chapter, participants acknowledged a level of challenge in maintaining the empowered mindset. By itself, this may not be cause for concern, as participants were at least able to articulate an awareness of these challenging experiences, which allowed them to consider taking more purposeful action in addressing them. However, for some participants, their desire to maintain the empowered mindset and their drive to put their identity as a curious educator and teacher first compelled them to consider or actively seek out different job opportunities. Much like the findings of Wilson et al. (2013), congruence between one's values and one's job

responsibilities is important for long-term commitment to one's position, and in the case of participants in this study, clarifying their values may have surfaced a larger issue of incongruity with their responsibilities.

For several participants, the inability to find opportunities to conduct more student learning outcomes assessments within their existing role prompted them to explore positions outside of student affairs, mainly in academic affairs or within institutional research. Even those who were not pursuing other opportunities talked about a yearning to find more time to do assessment work. Thus, feeling a strong sense of empowerment and excitement to assess student learning outcomes as a mid-level professional may ultimately result in practitioners seeking opportunities for greater professional gratification beyond the student affairs environment. Consequently, it is important for leaders of student affairs divisions to consider not just ways in which individual practitioners can develop an empowered mindset towards assessing student learning, but how that mindset can be further harnessed without having to seek out opportunities beyond the division itself. It is unfortunate that several of the participants in this study felt as though leaving student affairs would be the best way for them to capitalize upon their sense of empowerment and confidence for assessing student learning outcomes. Though not captured directly in the theoretical model, this aspect of the study should be cause for concern among leaders in the field.

Implications

While this study has focused on the experiences of mid-level student affairs professionals, the results have implications for multiple levels and stakeholders. Given

that many student affairs professionals gain entry into the field through a graduate program in higher education, student affairs, or a related discipline, the findings of this study have importance for instructors and program directors that oversee these educational opportunities. Additionally, as the field is shaped by the work of ACPA, NASPA, and other professional groups, the relevancy of this study for these associations is also considered. Lastly, implications for higher education and student affairs researchers are presented.

However, before articulating the implications of this study's findings for each of these respective audiences, one aspect of the results of this study transcends each group of stakeholders. Specifically, the theoretical model that emerged from this study illustrates that development of an empowered mindset towards one's responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes is anything but an individual process. This may not be surprising given that the study's literature review and methodology acknowledged the importance of understanding the meaning making process by examining the intersection of individuals, their organizational, and their work environment. Nonetheless, the implication for all stakeholders who may be affected by this study's findings is to consider meaning making and competency development in the field more generally, as occurring through multiple overlapping filters. Making meaning of one's responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes, and arguably any other job function, occurs and is influenced by a broader community. Although the purpose of this study was to explore the meaning making process of a specific group of mid-level student affairs professionals, its findings demonstrate a wide range of intrapersonal and interpersonal

factors that shaped participants. As a consequence, the findings of the study have consequence for both mid-level student affairs professionals, as well as all other areas of the larger community of student affairs that interact with and inform the development of those in mid-level positions.

Implications for mid-level professionals. As articulated by Hoffman and Bresciani (2010), responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes in student affairs positions occur most frequently in mid-level positions descriptions. Other research examined in the literature review suggested that upon entry into mid-level positions, student affairs professionals are likely to perceive themselves as lacking the necessary skills and competencies to perform assessment work, learning outcomes assessment, or general program evaluation (Burkard, et al., 2008; Cuyjet, et al., 2009; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006; Young & Janosik, 2007). These findings from previous studies served as the initial justification for defining the purpose this study. The implications of the study's findings are most substantial for professionals at this level.

The findings of this study illustrate the high degree of cognitive complexity that is accompanied by the transition from an entry-level position into a mid-level position where assessing student learning outcomes is expected. The theoretical model articulated by this study details the dissonance that mid-level professionals are likely to experience in making this transition, offering a framework and a language that can be used to help individuals navigate the transition itself. Perhaps the most significant implication of this study's theoretical framework for mid-level professionals is the claim that the high amount of cognitive dissonance expressed by participants in the study is both normal and

inevitable. If, as the literature reviewed previously suggests, entry-level student affairs professionals are unlikely to feel confident in their assessment abilities and do not find opportunities to build assessment competencies in their entry-level positions, the frustrated mindset would seem to be a natural structure for making meaning of assessing student learning outcomes upon one's transition into a mid-level role. However, this finding provides a reason to be optimistic, as new mid-level professionals can use this study's theoretical model as a framework for reflecting upon and interpreting their transition into new responsibilities.

Along these lines, in offering feedback on this study's preliminary findings, Wyatt stated, "There are good rubrics out there about assessment competencies in student affairs, what you would hope an entry or mid-level or seasoned professionals could do with a number of capacities, and while those are good for the knowledge and skills, the values piece isn't always described, so I feel like this fills a gap." This quote reflects a second important implication of this study's findings for mid-level professionals. Despite the abundance of materials that can be referenced to help one learn the knowledge and skills of how to perform assessment tasks, this study's findings shed light on the values, attitudes, and perceptions that participants bring to the execution of those tasks. Specifically, identifying as an educator or teacher seemed to be a core value held by participants in this study that contributed to their adoption of the empowered mindset. Whether assessment of student learning outcomes is an explicit expectation in one's job description, or shows up as "other duties as assigned," it is important for mid-level professionals to consider more than just the skills and knowledge required to conduct

assessment efforts. As this study shows, the values that inform how an individual approaches their work influence the mindset they use in making meaning of their responsibilities.

Ideally, reflection about one's values would occur during the process of considering a new position where assessing student learning is an expectation. The question for mid-level professionals to ponder should not simply be, "can I do this work?" but instead, "can I do this work, do I value it, and how do I feel about it?" The challenges expressed by participants and reflected in the frustrated mindset in this study's theoretical model demand that aspiring or new mid-level professionals deeply consider whether demonstrating student learning is consistent with one's attitudes, beliefs, and values. For mid-level professionals, this study's findings show that developing an empowered mindset towards assessing student learning outcomes entails thoughtful reflection on not just the skills and knowledge that one has (or does not have), but also the values that inform how one approaches developing this area of professional competence.

While the theoretical model that emerged from this study may have broader application to explain the meaning making process of mid-level professionals in areas of professional responsibility, the findings also suggest that assessing student learning is distinct. By its nature, assessing student learning outcomes is a very different job responsibility than other functions known to present challenges for those transitioning into mid-level positions, and most substantially, the supervision of other full-time professionals. While assuming responsibility for supervising full-time professional staff

is often considered one of the greatest challenges of moving into a mid-level position in student affairs (Roper, 2011; Tull, 2006; White, 2011), this study illustrates the nuanced complexity of adopting a new role with new expectations that has more than just increased supervisory duties. It is difficult to imagine that the categories included in the frustrated mindset would show up in seeking to understand the meaning making process of mid-level professionals in their supervision of staff. While increased supervisory responsibilities are likely to present challenges for new mid-level professionals, developing one's competence as a supervisor is not likely to be perceived as an add-on to one's role and its importance is likely to be clearly articulated. Consequently, it is important for mid-level professionals to recognize the likely differences that they will experience in adapting to and making sense of new job and increased responsibilities.

The findings of this study also have implications for how mid-level professionals interact with peers at their institution. Olivia, in commenting on the study's preliminary findings, stated, "This could be useful in my work with my staff, because right now, I talk about this is why assessment is important and this how you do it, but not really any of those reflective pieces." This illustrates the potential application of this study's theoretical model as a professional development tool in one's supervision of staff. As Olivia recognizes, it is important for mid-level professionals to find opportunities to build the reflective capacities of the individuals on their teams. This study confirms that teaching staff how to conduct assessment may be insufficient for developing an empowered mindset towards evaluating student learning outcomes. As participants recognized, having peers provide feedback about an assessment plan was something that

sparked their own reflection, and this is a strategy that supervisors could easily adopt for their staffs. Similarly, reflective writing or blogging about student learning assessment could be an expectation in a performance evaluation, to symbolize its importance but primarily to foster the same level of meaning making that participants in the study experienced. Consequently, mid-level professionals would be well-served to integrate themes from this study's theoretical model into their own staff development efforts.

However, implications from this study also indicate that the interactions that mid-level professionals have with peers outside of their own functional area greatly influence their meaning making process around student learning outcomes assessment. Whether it is through committee structures or during informal conversations, the results of this study offer mid-level professionals a language that they can use to create or enhance the meaning making catalysts in their organizational environment. Additionally, this study's findings offer tools that mid-level professionals can call upon when encountering individuals who express thoughts or feelings that represent the frustrated mindset towards student learning outcomes assessment. Both in naming the categories that make up the frustrated mindset and in articulating the empowered mindset that exists at the opposite end of the model, this study's findings give mid-level professionals a framework for understanding the behaviors of their peers and a mechanism for encouraging a deeper conversation about student learning outcomes within one's division.

Implications for senior-level professionals. The findings of this study also have substantial importance for senior-level professionals in student affairs. In the 2014 NASPA study of Chief Student Affairs Officers, student affairs assessment was one of

the most commonly added functional areas to student affairs divisions since 2010 (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014), which illustrates the likelihood of more senior-level professionals addressing this subject within their division in the future. Interestingly, however, in this same study, co-curricular learning outcomes was only fourth on a list of most important student success issues on campus, below graduation rates, persistence, and general assessment and accountability. Thus, at a national level, co-curricular student learning may still be taking a back seat to other forms of assessment.

With respect to this study's findings, first and foremost, senior leaders in student affairs significantly shape, intentionally or unintentionally, the context and lens through which student learning assessment is filtered. Participants in this study described experiences in which senior leaders failed to clarify expectations about the importance of student learning outcomes assessment, resulting in feelings of uncertainty, making it easier for them to prioritize other aspects of their position. Thus, the absence of clear expectations for delivering and assessing programs and services that facilitate student learning serve to strengthen the frustrated mindset. If student learning and its assessment are not of clear significance for senior leaders, any exposure to meaning making catalysts from this study's theoretical model are likely to have little impact. Moreover, senior leaders within student affairs who craft their language around assessment in terms of departmental and divisional survival are likely to see such a mindset play out among their staffs. If accountability for conducting assessment is framed and presented in a defensive manner, the opportunity for individuals to develop an empowered mindset towards it will likely be stifled.

Alternatively, a number of strategies discussed by participants in this study offer valuable guidance for senior-level student affairs professionals that can inform how they frame the importance of student learning and student learning outcomes assessment in their divisions. As an increasing number of student affairs divisions have a director of assessment position (Tull & Kuk, 2012), the findings of this study suggest that hiring an individual for such a position who is capable of mentoring other professionals is critically important. In some cases, this mentoring occurred indirectly through peer review processes or assessment committee structures, but nearly all participants discussed the critical feedback and support they received from their divisional director of assessment, either one-on-one or through one of these peer-to-peer processes set up by a senior leader. The implication of this finding is to seek out a director of assessment who is not just highly competent in executing assessment work, but is interested in and capable of mentoring mid-level professionals. Much of the assessment of student learning that happens in student affairs is likely to occur at the departmental level. Hence, the director of assessment position needs to be constructed as a position that will foster the growth of others.

Independent of the role of the student affairs division assessment director, senior leaders can adopt three other strategies to foster the meaning making of their mid-level staff in this area. First, developing formal structures and processes to normalize regular reflection in the workplace can contribute to growth not just in making meaning around student learning outcomes assessment, but arguably with professional responsibilities. Senior leaders can role model this behavior, but more importantly, they need to provide

the time for their mid-level professionals (and probably entry-level professionals) to reflect on their work and discuss those reflections with peers. Second, senior leaders can encourage mid-level professionals to pause and gain focus in their assessment work by limiting requests for data to prioritized initiatives and by allowing time and space for deeper analysis of data. As Olivia stated, "If we're going to put in processes to collect all of this good and rich data, that we also need to ensure that we have time set aside to analyze it as well." Senior leaders should address the perception that everything needs to be assessed and also raise reporting expectations by demanding a greater level of sophistication in the analysis of data that is collected. Finally, senior leaders can identify those mid-level professionals who have developed a mastery of assessing student learning outcomes and empower them to facilitate the learning of their peers. As Ibarra (1999) found, observing role models perform a new and unproven job function can offer permission to others in the organization to experiment with behaviors, leading to residual positive benefits for those who interact with the role model. Moreover, as this study's findings show, once mid-level professionals arrived at an empowered mindset towards assessing student learning, opportunities to teach others provided participants with a sense of gratification and fulfillment in their work.

Implications for entry-level professionals and graduate students. Though they were not the focus of this study, its findings have implications for entry-level professionals and graduate students who aspire to mid-level positions. The implication of this study's findings for entry-level professionals and graduate students is to seek out professional development experiences early in one's career that will offer opportunities to

learn more about assessing student learning. Developing learning outcomes, identifying strategies for assessing them, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting on results are all experiences that should be gained by entry-level professionals or graduate students prior to arriving at a mid-level position. Unfortunately, however, existing research on socialization in student affairs suggests that the value of assessing student learning is not perceived to be an essential value in the field (Bureau, 2011; Tull & Medrano, 2008). With assessing student learning increasing in its importance at the mid-level, one could argue that entry-level professionals and graduate students who start building their skills and competencies in this area earlier will be better positioned to find the mid-level positions they want.

Additionally, the findings of this study highlight the importance of developing habits of reflecting on one's experiences early in one's professional career. A recent study of the perceptions among mid-level student affairs professionals about the competencies of entry-level professionals found "concern that entry-level professionals often do not know how to reflect on their work, limiting their ability for meaning-making and connecting their work to the whole educational experience" (Gansemer-Topf & Ryder, 2014, p. 1). The implications of this study's findings is that professionals who develop habits of reflection will be better prepared to make meaning of complex work responsibilities. Thus, building one's capacity for reflection should be a developmental goal for entry-level professionals and graduate students in student affairs.

Implications for student affairs graduate programs. Educational programs play a critical role in shaping the initial knowledge base and skill set of professionals

entering into full-time positions in student affairs. While courses in assessment in student affairs may slowly be making their way into the curricula of graduate programs, this study has implications for the content of these courses. Specifically, it is not sufficient for these courses to teach graduate students the mechanics of effective assessment. Whether courses cover program evaluation, student learning assessment, research methods, or all three, the findings of this study illustrate that developing an empowered mindset towards understanding one's assessment responsibilities entails much more than knowing how to perform assessment work. Olivia talked about the potential relevance of the theoretical model within graduate programs, stating:

> I could see this in graduate school alongside the curricular work to help graduate students think about, what are the pieces that are going to impact how you approach it? It could also normalize some of the experiences that folks are going to have in this area. You're going to work with some folks who are thinking about assessment work and the bottom line, and want things to really justify that.

Consequently, the findings of this study suggest that any course on assessment in student affairs needs to provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on the content of the course and its intersection with relevant professional experiences. In doing so, student affairs graduate programs can bridge the gap between the theory presented in the classroom and the challenges that professionals face when putting that knowledge into action.

Additionally, this study warrants an examination of student development theory courses. Nearly all professionals in student affairs take a course in student development

theory at some point in their education. The findings of this study suggest that assessment of student development needs to have a place in the content of student development theory courses. Arguably, instead of having one course on student development theory and one course on assessment in student affairs, graduate programs would be better served to offer one course on student development and its assessment. The findings of this study showed that participants needed to revisit student development theory as a catalyst for making the transition from the frustrated mindset to the empowered mindset. The implication of this finding is that courses in student development theory may present an opportunity to develop an empowered mindset towards assessing student learning earlier in one's professional journey. Consequently, graduate programs in student affairs would be well-served to reexamine their curricula to more purposefully integrate student development theory coursework with opportunities for students to assess student learning. Such a change, arguably, could see students leaving a course on student development theory with not just an understanding of it, but also a commitment towards their professional responsibilities for assessing learning outcomes encompassed by the theories they have encountered in the course.

Implications for professional associations. The findings of this study have implications for ACPA, NASPA, CAS and other professional associations within student affairs. The developmental nature of the theoretical model that emerged from this study reaffirms the basic, intermediate, and advanced structure that is used to articulate increasing levels of sophistication required by student affairs professionals to be competent in the area of assessment, evaluation, and research (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

On the one hand, it is a positive outcome to see that the competency standards in this area of the professional mirror the developmental process described by participants of this study, but also the manner in which participants came to think about this aspect of their work with greater complexity in the transition from the frustrated mindset to the empowered mindset is positive. However, the competency standards lack any mention of how one might progress from a basic to an intermediate level of competence, and then from an intermediate to an advance level of competence.

The findings of this study illuminate a process that could be used by ACPA and NASPA to more clearly articulate how growth and transition occur within and between the different levels of the competency itself. This is arguably one of the biggest criticisms of the competency standards as a whole. While the standards themselves are less than five years old, the findings of this study present an opportunity for strengthening the standards by integrating language to articulate the process by which greater levels of competence can be reached. During the course of this study, NACA, the National Association of Campus Activities, released the results of research finding that only 18% of individuals surveyed were conducting assessment related to assessing student learning, with only 1% rating themselves as an expert in this area of their work (2014). While this NACA study did not break down its findings by level of responsibility, its findings further reinforce the implications of this study for higher education associations. If only 1% of campus activities professionals view themselves as experts in their assessment work, there is clearly more to be done to advance the competencies of student affairs

professionals in this area, and the findings of this study articulate one way for thinking about how that challenge can be addressed.

Moreover, while this study and its findings were focused on understanding the meaning making process of professionals in assessing student learning outcomes, the study's theoretical model may have possible transferability to illuminate the developmental process of mid-level student affairs practitioners in other competency areas. While there is undoubtedly something unique about assessing student learning outcomes as an aspect of one's work, there may be overlap between the meaning making process articulated by the theoretical model of this study and other responsibilities of mid-level professionals. Consequently, the implication for professional associations in the field is to prioritize and encourage greater exploration and understanding of how mid-level professionals successfully become more competent and confident in all of their responsibilities. These meaning making processes need to inform the professional development experiences provided to mid-level practitioners by student affairs associations in the same way that they need to inform the curricula of graduate programs.

Implications for researchers. Lastly, the findings of this study have implications for higher education and student affairs scholars and researchers. As was illustrated in the literature review, little research exists on the experiences of mid-level professionals in general, and almost none examining assessment skills and competencies. Moreover, much of the scholarly student affairs literature that does take a qualitative approach to exploring the experiences of practitioners focuses on entry-level or senior-level professionals. The findings of this study highlight the need for scholars and researchers to

further develop a body of knowledge that examines mid-level professionals in general. More specifically, as this study shows, there is a substantial amount of cognitive and developmental dissonance that occurs in the transition into a mid-level position, at least with respect to making meaning of one's student learning outcomes assessment responsibilities. Consequently, more studies are needed to consider other aspects of the entry-level to mid-level transition.

Future research on assessing student learning outcomes within student affairs might also benefit from considering the ways in which social identities intersect with the findings of this study. This study did not seek to understand the ways in which identities such as race, class, gender, or sexual orientation may have influenced the meaning making process of participants. These social identities, and others, may inform the meaning making process explored by this study, but a true examination of how this happens was beyond the scope of this project. Subsequent studies regarding assessing student learning as a professional competency in student affairs, or arguably any professional competency area, could seek to explore the intersectionality of social identities and the competencies themselves.

Additionally, the findings of this study confirm the need to study the meaning making process at the intersection of the individual and their organizational environment (Greeno, 1998). Researchers who design and execute studies with a focus on either the individual or the organization will continue to miss out on the rich interplay between the two. This study's findings illustrate that meaning making occurs through overlapping lenses, as participants framed and interpreted their experiences and perceptions in

relationship to their own core identities, but also in relationship to others in their immediate work environment, as well as in relationship to a broader external audience. While the competency standards in student affairs present the impression that they are to be achieved and understood as responsibilities of the individual, this study's findings show that this is not the case. Researchers looking to explore the development of competencies among student affairs professionals need to be mindful of the organizational and environmental influences that contribute to the progression (or lack thereof) of individual practitioners. Additional qualitative research that considers the relationship between the individual practitioner and their organizational context is needed to more fully understand the processes and structures that interact to inform growth of student affairs professionals.

Limitations

Despite what the findings add to the literature on assessment in student affairs, there are several limitations that need to be explicitly addressed. First, as was stated earlier, two participants – Martie and Elizabeth – were only able to participate in the study's first phase of data collection. These two participants were unable to continue in the study and were not able to provide reflective journals, nor were they able to participate in the second interview or member-checking processes. Thus, participant attrition is a limitation to the study. Additionally, the selection criteria for this study were crafted on the assumption that assessment of student learning outcomes in student affairs was more likely to be a responsibility for professionals at public institutions. Student affairs professionals at private institutions may also be responsible for assessing student

learning outcomes, and consequently, the theoretical model developed by this study may look different if the experiences of professionals at private institutions were to have been considered. Future research on this topic must consider any differences in assessing student learning outcomes by institutional type.

Similarly, the sampling criteria for this study also argued that assessment of student learning outcomes was more likely to be a responsibility for professionals at larger institutions. However, a recent study by NACA, found that among student activities professionals, 87% of those not yet engaged in strategic assessment planning efforts were at institutions with less than 20,000 full-time equivalent students (2014), so there may be support for this study's sampling criteria. By omission, however, this study did not consider the experiences of mid-level professionals at smaller institutions. Institutional size may be a relevant factor in the experiences of professionals in student affairs, and consequently, the findings of this study may have less relevance for the meaning making process of professionals at smaller colleges and universities. Specifically, smaller institutions will have fewer staff members, and may be less likely to have individuals who are able to provide the critical feedback, mentoring, and oversight of structural support mechanisms that served as meaning making catalysts for participants in this study. Within a smaller division of student affairs, the meaning making process around assessment of student learning outcomes may be informed by different structures and environmental factors, which is a limitation of the findings from this study.

The study also only included participants who were self-nominated or nominated by others as being "superb" in assessing student learning outcomes in their work. This

was an intentional choice made with the hope that findings that would emerge to fill a gap in the literature that could shed light on a competency in student affairs that is generally perceived to be a weakness for many professionals. Consequently, the reader cannot assume that other mid-level professionals in similar roles as participants of this study who would not be identified as "superb" at assessing student learning outcomes would make meaning of this responsibility in a similar way as articulated by this study's theoretical model, or that those with a perceived deficit in this area would only articulate experiences that are consistent with the frustrated mindset. This limitation may also be another opportunity to expand and deepen the research on mid-level professionals.

Lastly, this study chose to focus upon the experiences of participants in programmatic areas of student affairs, such as residence life, career services, diversity programs, leadership education, and student activities. As a limitation, the experiences of mid-level professionals in other areas of student affairs that might be considered more service-oriented could be different than the experiences of participants in this study. For professionals in student health services, counseling services, disability services, and other areas of student affairs that may have less of a programmatic focus, the nature of the work itself may shape a meaning making process that is different than that described by the findings of this study. As participants in these departments within student affairs divisions were excluded from this study, its findings may have limited application for them, and future research on this topic should explore the ways in which professionals in service-oriented areas of student affairs make meaning of assessing student learning outcomes. Ultimately, there may not be any substantive differences, but the exclusion of

participants from service-oriented areas of student affairs is a limitation for the findings of this study.

Summary

This chapter discussed broader themes and consequences of the theoretical model and other findings presented and analyzed in the previous chapter. The larger significance of the frustrated mindset, meaning making catalysts, and empowered mindset was addressed. While the findings of this study shed light on a previously unexplored aspect of the student affairs literature, and fill a much needed gap in exploring the experiences of mid-level professionals with an emerging and increasingly important job responsibility, the findings themselves have both positive and negative interpretations and considerations. There are implications from the findings of this study for student affairs professionals at all levels, as well as graduate preparation programs, associations, and researchers. While the study is not without its limitations, its theoretical model may serve as a springboard for additional research on this subject and presents a number of possibilities for improving the professional development and growth of practitioners within the field.

APPENDIX A

First Interview Protocol

Introduction

1. Tell me a bit about you – where you are from, your educational background, and your professional work history.
2. In your own words, tell me about the responsibilities of your current job.

Main Part of the Interview

3. In your opinion, in relation to other aspects of your work, how important a responsibility is it to be able to assess student learning? Why is it more/less important to you personally than other responsibilities?
4. What does student learning mean to you in your work?
5. Tell me about a recent experience in which you had to assess student learning outcomes. Did you feel successful? What were the easiest aspects of it? Hardest aspects of it?
6. What are some of the challenges to assessing student learning outcomes? Can you talk about a recent challenge?
7. What are some goals that you want to achieve when you assess student learning outcomes.
8. What feelings or emotions come to mind when you think about assessing student learning?
9. Do you feel prepared to be able to assess student learning outcomes? Have you always felt prepared, or has it been a process?
10. What expectations do others have for you for this area of your work? Are those expectations fair? Do you feel well-situated to fulfill them?
11. What strategies have you created to help you be successful in assessing student learning outcomes?

Closing

12. What advice would you give to other student affairs professionals who are responsible for assessing student learning outcomes in their job?
13. What do you wished you had known earlier in your career about assessing student learning that you know now?
14. What else do you think it is important for me to know that we have not yet discussed?

APPENDIX B

Second Interview Protocol

Introduction

1. What was it like to keep a journal about what was happening at work over the last few months?
2. How has your position evolved since the last time we talked?

Main Part of the Interview

3. What is something new you learned about yourself and your work with student learning outcomes assessment since we had the first interview?
4. When it comes to assessing student learning outcomes, where do you think you have the most room to grow, both in your thinking and behaviors?
5. Has your thinking about the importance of assessing student learning in your work evolved since we first talked? If so, how? What influenced this evolution?
6. If you could have more time in the day at work to work on assessing student learning outcomes, how much time a week would you want and how would you use it?
7. If you were to leave your position for another department or institution, how would your departure impact your current department's capacity for assessing student learning?
8. As you look at the themes that have emerged from my data collection and analysis to this point (sent via email in advance), which resonate with you? What themes surprised you? What might you add?

Closing

9. What else do you think it is important for me to know that we have not yet discussed?

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

THE MEANING MAKING PROCESS OF MID-LEVEL STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS: A THEORY ON THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES
This research is being conducted to explore the process by which mid-level student affairs professionals at colleges and universities make meaning of their responsibilities for assessing student learning outcomes. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in two 60 minute interviews that will be video taped, and keep a reflective journal for two months that will be submitted via email.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS
The benefits to you may include the opportunity to deeply reflect upon your professional experiences and the processes and structures that have contributed to how you understand your work. The benefits to the profession, including higher education scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, from your participation in this study may include a more robust picture of how individual practitioners make meaning of their assessment responsibilities.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The data in this study will be confidential. You and your place of employment will be given a pseudonym. This pseudonym will be used in all transcripts, memos, coding documents, and final reports that come from this research. Video recordings of interviews will be password protected and kept in a secure location. Journal submissions will also be password protected and kept in a secure location. A password protected file will be kept by the researcher as an identification key to link participants and their pseudonym, but only the researcher will have access to this file. All files will be stored in a password

protected secure location for up to 7 years, after which all records from this study will be deleted. While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission. While your name and other personal identifying information will not be connected with any materials for this study, you understand that there is a possibility of someone recognizing you through the use of quotations and contextual descriptions.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Evan Baum, a doctoral student at George Mason University, under the direction of Dr. Jan Arminio, Higher Education Program Chair at George Mason University. Evan can be reached at 202-306-5569 or ebaum@gmu.edu. Dr. Arminio can be reached at 703-993-2064 or at jarminio@gmu.edu for questions or to report a research related-problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form, all of my questions have been answered by the researcher, and I agree to participate in this study.

_____

Name

_____

Date of Signature

APPENDIX D

Journal Reflection Questions

JOURNAL #1

Based upon the first interview, here are some initial reflection questions for you consider in your first four-week submission:

- What cues or signals do you observe at work about assessing student learning outcomes? When and where do you notices these cues or signals? How do you interpret these cues or signals?
- How do your personal and professional values show up in your day-to-day experiences at work where you are asked to assess student learning outcomes?
- Over this four week period, what experience at work related to assessing student learning outcomes stands out most vividly? Why?

JOURNAL #2

- In what circumstances at work do you notice or observe yourself encountering resistance regarding assessing student learning outcomes? What do you do in addressing that resistance?
- In what circumstances do you find yourself discussing student learning outcome assessment results? What stands out to you in those discussions?
- As you go throughout your day over this four week period, at what points, if any, do you find yourself identifying as an educator? What happens in these moments?

APPENDIX E

Participants

There were 10 participants in this study. Basic information for these participants is summarized below. Participants were given pseudonyms and their institutional affiliations are masked to provide a reasonable assurance of confidentiality.

Pseudonym	Gender	Functional Area	Education	Institution
Will	Male	Student Activities	Master's Level	Southeast University 1
Elaine	Female	Learning Services	Master's Level	Midwest University 1
Joan	Female	Residence Life	Doctorate In-Progress	Midwest University 2
Sasha	Female	Leadership Programs	Master's Level	Midwest University 3
Olivia	Female	Student Activities	Doctorate In-Progress	Central University
Carmen	Female	Alcohol and Drug Education	Doctorate In-Progress	Northern University
Leilani	Female	Residence Life/Judicial Affairs	Master's Level	Pacific University 1
Wyatt	Male	Intercultural Programs	Master's Level	Pacific University 2
Martie	Female	Residence Life	Master's Level	Midwest University (Private)
Elizabeth	Female	Student Union Programs	Doctorate Completed	Southeast University 2

APPENDIX F

Call For Participants

Dear Student Affairs Colleagues:

I am requesting your assistance to help me identify participants for a research study examining mid-level professionals in student affairs and their work assessing student learning outcomes. Specifically, I am hoping you can connect me with individuals you believe to be "superb" mid-level practitioners of assessing student learning. The goal of this study is to provide a robust examination of the processes and structures contributing to how individual mid-level student affairs practitioners make meaning of their student learning outcomes assessment responsibilities.

Participants in the study would need to meet the following criteria:
1. Currently employed full-time as a mid-level student affairs professional at a public college or university in the United States enrolling 5,000 or more students;

2. Employed in a programmatically-focused functional area such as residence life, career services, orientation/first-year experience, multicultural affairs, student involvement/activities, fraternity and sorority life, international programs, etc.;

3. Has transitioned into their first mid-level job in student affairs within the last five years;

4. Is responsible for directly assessing student learning outcomes in their work;

5. Assessing student learning outcomes is not the sole or primary responsibility of their position, but rather is one of multiple job functions.

No two participants in this study will be employed at the same college or university to ensure full confidentiality. Data collection will occur between approximately October 2014 and February 2015.

To nominate yourself or a colleague for this study, or if you have any questions, please contact me at ebaum@gmu.edu or evansbaum@gmail.com.

This research study has been reviewed and approved according to George Mason University Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures governing human subjects research.

Thank you,
Evan Baum
PhD Candidate
George Mason University

Dr. Jan Arminio
Professor & Higher Education Program Director
George Mason University

APPENDIX G

Coding And Category Tables

Identifying As and Prioritizing Administrator
Balancing priorities
Balancing responsibilities
Being heavier at times
Being in survival mode
Being too busy
Challenging to scale up
Conflicting values
Connecting to the day-to-day
Demonstrating commitment
Differing priorities
Disconnecting from day-to-day
Failing to the wayside
Falling in somewhere
Falling to the side
Feeling overwhelmed
Finding the time
Finding the time
Finding the time
Finding time
Finding time and space
Finding time to plan
Following through with analysis
Handling new priorities
Having more time
Increasing with reporting time

Justifying speculations
Lacking time
Lacking time
Making time
Making time commitment
Managing up
Missing from the radar
Missing time
Missing time
Moving into new responsibilities
Pressing obligations
Prioritizing learning
Pushing down the list
Shuffling back down
Sitting with data and reflecting
Struggling to find time
Thinking it's an afterthought
Understanding purpose
Understanding using surveys
Using results (not)
Using the data
Valuing as a norm

Oversimplifying Student Affairs Role and Purpose
Addressing stereotypes
Addressing stereotypes
Attaching like a barnacle
Confronting stereotypes
Feeling forced
Feeling isolated
Finding inconsistency in purposes
Having negative view

Having to do assessment
Identifying as an educator
Identifying as an educator
Lacking commitment
Lacking focus
Moving beyond anecdotal data
Overcoming stereotypes
Oversimplifying ourselves
Programming without worry
Pushing down the list
Seeking respect as profession
Seeking tangible results
Staying focused
Telling authentic story

Navigating and Negotiating Expectations
Advancing in the future
Articulating complexity
Being realistic
Being underprepared
Clarifying expectations
Confronting misperceptions
Creating ownership in staff
Developing accountability standards
Differing levels of expectations
Establishing consistency in analysis
Getting on the same page
Having clear expectations
Having patience
Having realistic expectations
Having specific expectations
Holding others accountable
Isolating impact is challenge

Lacking clear goals
Lacking clear path
Lacking commitment from above
Lacking expectations
Letting patterns emerge
Managing new expectations
Meeting cultural expectations
Motivating staff/others
Moving beyond satisfaction
Negotiating politics
Overcoming practical obstacles
Packaging neat results
Seeing wider perspective
Sensing pressures
Setting clear expectations
Setting expectations for others
Taking ownership
Uncovering motivations
Understanding complexity
Using assessment in supervision
Using carrots

Justifying Role to Keep Funding and Resources
Achieving results
Acting ethically with funding
Adding value
Adding value
Adding value
Being scrutinized
Caring about impact
Demonstrating impact
Demonstrating impact
Demonstrating impact

Demonstrating importance
Ensuring contribution
Ensuring program fidelity
Ensuring success
Establishing credibility
Feeling accountability
Feeling cold reality
Feeling external pressures
Feeling obligation
Feeling pressure
Finding donors
Justifying funding
Justifying funding
Justifying impact
Justifying role
Justifying work
Keeping resources
Maintaining funding
Making an impact
Needing resources
Providing evidence for existence
Providing value
Racing for funding
Reaffirming value
Reaping benefits
Sharing our relevance
Showing impact
Showing off
Showing value
Showing value
Showing value
Showing value
Throwing money at it

Acknowledging Limitations and Lack of Preparation
Acknowledging learning curve
Asking too much
Believing in self
Broadening perspective
Developing competence
Developing confidence
Educating professionals differently
Encouraging self-reflection
Feeling fraudulent
Feeling lost
Feeling nervous
Feeling underprepared
Gaining confidence
Gaining deeper understanding
Getting a better handle
Knowing limitations
Lacking competence
Lacking confidence
Lacking confidence
Lacking grad program preparation
Lacking grad program preparation
Lacking grad program preparation
Lacking graduate program preparation
Lacking graduate program preparation
Lacking understanding
Learning from experience
Missing practical training
Missing the boat
Needing development
Overcoming fear
Overcoming insecurity
Piecing together education

Realizing limitations
Recognizing gaps in own education
Seeing the big picture
Seeking professional development
Seeking to improve
Understanding self limitations

Pausing and Gaining Focus
Accessing institutional data
Accounting for transitions
Achieving specific outcome
Aiming for comprehensiveness
Articulating concisely
Asking the right questions
Assessing everything
Avoiding duplication
Avoiding over assessing
Balancing capacity with interests
Being efficient
Breaking it down
Building in learning pieces
Building upon a model
Challenging to identify outcomes
Coming full circle
Conducting strategic plan
Connecting goals and programs
Continuing process
Contributing to learning
Creating a comprehensive plan
Creating a cycle
Creating a model framework
Creating an assessment plan
Creating infrastructure

Creating infrastructure
Creating structure as a guide
Creating structure as a guide
Developing a plan
Developing learning outcomes
Developing process over time
Documenting for reporting
Doing less
Doing purposeful data collection
Doing purposeful work
Ensuring sustainability
Ensuring sustainability
Ensuring sustainability
Exhausting participants
Figuring it out in phases
Focusing on outcomes
Focusing on purpose
Focusing on specific outcomes
Getting in a rhythm
Getting into a cycle
Getting organized
Growing slowly
Having a foundation
Identifying common data elements
Inspiring a culture
Interpreting other's data
Joining division committee
Lacking infrastructure
Lacking structure
Maintaining infrastructure
Making intended difference
Mapping a curriculum
Mapping out activities
Mapping out activities

Mapping outcomes to activities
Matching technique to outcome
Meeting intentions
Missing identified outcomes
Narrowing focus
Picking from a menu
Pilling up stuff
Piloting assessment
Planning ahead
Planning ahead
Planning ahead
Planning ahead
Planning comprehensively
Planning for different phases
Planning for long-term
Prioritizing choices
Prioritizing learning
Prioritizing participation
Progressing in phases
Putting it first
Rotating outcomes assessment
Scaling back
Seeking reliable data
Seeking sustainability
Setting outcomes
Setting up for others
Setting up structure
Standardizing reports
Starting with participation tracking
Starting with what works
Stockpiling data
Stopping over assessing
Struggling with goal identification
Taking long-term approach

Taking things in phases
Tracking activities
Tying it together
Using existing data sets
Using results internally
Utilizing technology
Varying levels of outcomes
Wanting baseline measures
Wasting time
Weighing opportunity cost
Working from the bottom up

Receiving Critical Feedback and Support
Accessing internal resources
Asking for help
Asking questions
Bouncing ideas around
Bouncing ideas around
Cleaning up in transition
Connecting with colleagues
Connecting with division director
Connecting with division director
Critiquing peers
Discussing with partners
Doing it already
Eliminating assessment director
Feeling supported
Finding peer support
Finding resources
Finding support
Finding support
Finding support
Finding support

Furthering own education
Getting critical feedback
Getting critical feedback
Getting help from others
Getting regular feedback
Getting support from division
Having a mentor
Having a mentor/teacher
Having a teacher
Hearing different perspectives
Identifying gaps
Identifying resources
Influencing supervisor
Interacting with peers
Learning from others
Mentoring by division director
Mentoring from division director
Missing internal support
Partnering with assessment director
Planting seeds
Receiving peer feedback
Relying upon divisional director
Seeking out resources
Seeking partners
Setting the tone
Sharing practices with peers
Supportive culture
Using divisional expertise
Utilizing division assessment director

Connecting to Academics, Mission, and Theory
Adding to division/institutional mission
Aligning with academics

Building education
Connecting to a division project
Connecting to academics
Connecting to academics
Connecting to CAS standards
Connecting to CAS standards
Connecting to CAS standards
Connecting to common goals
Connecting to division
Connecting to division priorities
Connecting to divisional outcomes
Connecting to divisional outcomes
Connecting to institutional mission
Connecting to institutional mission
Connecting to theory
Connecting to university mission
Connecting to university mission
Connecting with the environment
Connecting with theory
Enhancing academic learning
Evaluating place within institution
Exhausting participants
Finding inconsistency in purposes
Fitting into divisional goals
Focusing divisionally
Grounding in CAS standards
Having credibility with faculty
Integrating with academic
Making it institutionally relevant
Mapping outcomes
Mapping to division goals
Mapping with institutional priorities
Moving towards academics
Relying upon existing literature

Returning to literature
Serving on a committee
Shifting organizational environment
Telling academic partners
Tying to academics
Using existing evidence
Using theory as foundation

Identifying First as Curious Teacher/Educator
Assessing as learning opportunity
Being curious
Being inquisitive
Being motivated
Being passionate
Building rigorous programs
Building skills in others
Connecting assessment to teaching
Creating learning outcomes
Curious about co-curricular learning
Delivering learning as product
Developing second nature
Drawing upon self motivation
Embedding into everything
Enjoying assessment
Enjoying assessment
Enjoying assessment
Enjoying results
Excitement to learn
Facilitating learning
Fascinating to see research goals
Feeling excited
Feeling motivated
Feeling passionate

Finding a personal interest
Finding enjoyment
Finding enjoyment
Finding excitement
Finding fascination
Finding K-12 unimpressed
Finding purpose
Framing as a mystery
Having awesome opportunity
Having evidence-based practice
Having fun
Having passion for education
Having previous interest
Identifying as an educator
Identifying as an educator
Identifying as educator
Incorporating into thought process
Indicating we're educators
Integrating into everything
Integrating into programming
Integrating into work
Loving assessment
Maintaining integrity
Making a part of daily work
Missing opportunities
Piecing together puzzle
Playing with data
Playing with data
Prioritizing learning
Seeing growth
Supervising as learning opportunity
Taking it up a level
Taking pride
Teaching includes measuring learning

Teaching is intimidating
Understanding role as educator
Valuing learning
Willing to do it
Wrestling with identity

Addressing and Reframing Resistance and Fear
Addressing fears
Assessing out of fear
Being at the table
Being comfortable with data
Being intimidated
Being okay with unknown
Confronting politics
Demystifying assessment
Feeling anxious
Feeling comfortable
Feeling complicated
Feeling concerned
Feeling forced
Feeling intimidated
Feeling overwhelmed
Finding inconsistency in purposes
Finding resistance
Generating buy-in
Getting buy-in
Getting others on board
Getting push back
Happening already
Having voice go unheard
Justifying to others
Managing up
Moving past resistance

Needing support from others
Overcoming fear
Overcoming fear
Overcoming fear
Overcoming mental barriers
Reframing as positive
Reframing work
Seeking buy-in
Seeking out information
Setting aside certainty
Setting aside ego
Taking away fear
Threatening security
Using results internally
Valuing as a norm

Developing Mastery to Model for and Teach Others
Acknowledging limits of self-reported data
Assessing different levels
Avoiding satisfaction surveys
Being a model
Being an expert
Building skills in others
Capturing post-event actions
Challenging to directly measure
Collecting multiple measurements
Comparing short and long-term
Creating ownership in staff
Determining measurements
Differentiating from research
Differentiating from research
Differentiating uses of data
Doing a roadshow

Experimenting with techniques
Helping others
Lacking good tools and techniques
Leading in division
Limiting participation data
Making direct observations
Matching technique to intervention
Measuring before and after
Measuring shorter activities
Modeling for others
Modeling for others
Moving beyond anecdotal data
Moving past self-reported data
Recognizing limits of self-reported data
Relying upon indirect measures
Running ahead
Seeking to model for others
Taking different approaches
Teaching others
Tracking longitudinally
Trying to do direct measurement
Using experimental design
Using mixed approaches
Using mixed methods
Using mixed methods
Using more than self-reported data
Using multiple measures
Using multiple measures
Using multiple methods
Using multiple techniques
Using pre and post test
Utilizing classroom techniques

Seeking Improvement/Autonomy Through Sharing Results
Adjusting from data
Adjusting from data
Advocating for social change
Analyzing efficacy
Articulating results
Assessing as activism
Avoiding temptation
Barreling down with standardization
Being ethical
Being frustrated by results
Being independent
Being proactive
Challenging selves
Closing the loop
Connecting to reporting
Connecting to reporting
Contributing to persistence
Dealing with bad results
Determining effectiveness
Determining effectiveness
Determining fit
Determining impact of intervention
Determining to do better
Driven to improve
Driving decisions
Evaluating plans
Evaluating practices
Expressing results
Fearing the institution
Generating usable results
Heading off at the pass
Honoring participants

Identifying patterns
Identifying the gaps
Identifying what isn't working
Improving programs with data
Improving student experience
Improving student experiences
Improving the future
Looking critically at work
Making evidence-based decisions
Making improvements
Making improvements
Making improvements
Measuring effect of interventions
Not hiding results
Pointing out gaps
Producing results
Promoting results
Protecting spaces
Putting results into action
Reframing as opportunity
Reporting as obligation
Reporting for division
Reporting to multiple audiences
Revisiting program
Seeing the value
Seeking autonomy
Seeking impact of results
Setting own agenda
Shaping the future
Sharing results
Sharing story
Sharing with external audiences
Showcasing work of staff
Striving to improve

Taking action
Telling authentic story
Telling stories
Telling stories
Telling story
Telling story
Understanding student benefits
Understanding what is working
Using data for planning
Using data to stop something
Using numbers
Using results
Using results (not)
Using results internally
Using results to drive change
Validating experiences
Wanting to share results
Working from the inside

APPENDIX H

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance
Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5,
Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: August 14, 2014

TO: Jan Arminio

FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [641355-1] The meaning making process of mid-level student affairs professionals: A theory on the responsibility for assessing student learning outcomes

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: August 14, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE: August 13, 2015
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The George Mason University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed

consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Office of Research Integrity & Assurance (ORIA). Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed (if applicable).

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the ORIA.

The anniversary date of this study is August 13, 2015. This project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. You may not collect date beyond this date without prior IRB approval. A continuing review form must be completed and submitted to the ORIA at least 30 days prior to the anniversary date or upon completion of this project. Prior to the anniversary date, the ORIA will send you a reminder regarding continuing review procedures.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of five years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Bess Dieffenbach at 703-993-4121 or edieffen@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.

Generated on IRBNet

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Biography

Evan Baum graduated from Westfield Senior High School in Westfield, New Jersey in 1999. Evan has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Leadership Studies and Political Science from the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond. Evan received a Master of Arts in Education Policy and Leadership from the University of Maryland, College Park in 2005 and a Master of Science in Organizational Development and Knowledge Management from George Mason University in 2009. Evan has worked in university administration in both student affairs and academic affairs at the University of Maryland, College Park, the George Washington University, and George Mason University. In 2014, Evan left George Mason University for the private sector when he joined Starfish Retention Solutions, Inc. In his role with Starfish, Evan provides strategic change management consulting to college and university executives in academic affairs, student affairs, enrollment management, institutional research, and information technology to maximize the impact of student success initiatives. In 2015, Starfish was acquired by Hobsons, Inc., though Evan's role remained largely unchanged. In this study's final phases, Evan and his wife Beth moved to Ardmore, Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia, after being in the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area for over 12 years.