

The First Year on the Job: Experiences of New Professionals in Student Affairs

Kristen A. Renn
Jennifer P. Hodges



Ten new student affairs professionals participated in this longitudinal study of their first year on the job. This qualitative study used online data collection. Participants submitted monthly responses to open-ended prompts inquiring about their experiences, challenges, and surprises. Over three time phases (Pre-Employment and Orientation, Transition, and Settled In), three themes emerged: the importance of relationships, institutional and professional fit, and issues of competence and confidence. Findings suggest several implications for practice, including preparing new professionals, being a new professional, and supervising new professionals. The authors suggest areas for future research.

New professionals—first-time, full-time student affairs staff with five or fewer years of experience—represent a substantial population in the field, estimated at 15% to 20% of the student affairs workforce (Cilente, Henning, Skinner Jackson, Kennedy, & Sloane, 2006). They come from all academic backgrounds at every type of institution, and

Kristen A. Renn is an associate professor of higher, adult, and lifelong education at Michigan State University in East Lansing, MI. Jennifer P. Hodges is a doctoral student at Michigan State University in East Lansing, MI.

work in all types of settings, including community colleges, for-profit institutions, and online institutions (Cilente et al., 2006; Hirt, 2006). In spite of this diversity, new professionals as a group report common experiences related to transition from bachelor's or master's programs, relationship formation, mentor seeking, and work-life balance issues (Hodges, Renn, Paul, Maker, & Munsey, 2006; Magolda & Carnighi, 2004; Richmond & Sherman, 1991). Attrition from the field has been cited as a concern (Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006), and attention to preparing and supervising new professionals is emerging as a priority (Herdlein, 2004; Janosik et al., 2003; Tull, 2006). The importance of this professional stage is acknowledged through the availability of resources for and about new professionals such as Amey and Ressor's (2002) *Beginning Your Journey* and Magolda and Carnighi's (2004) *Job One*, which are important guides for understanding organizational contexts and the transition into the profession. Research on the new professional experience, however, has largely been limited to the topics of graduate preparation, job satisfaction and attrition, and supervision of new professionals. The recent *Report on the New Professional Needs Study* (Cilente et al., 2006) expands this research base to include professional development needs.

A substantial proportion of new professionals in student affairs come into the field through master's programs in student affairs, college student personnel, higher education, or a related field (Renn, Jessup Anger, & Hodges, 2007; Cilente et al., 2006). Graduate programs are therefore an important site for the formation of new professionals' ideas and ideals. Graduate preparation program faculty have examined ways that master's programs prepare new professionals and competencies sought in recent graduates (e.g., Kretovics, 2002; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Palmer, 1995). Research has demonstrated the efficacy of graduate programs in integrating, among other topics, information technology (Renn & Zeligman, 2005; Engstrom, 1997), diversity and multicultural competence (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002; McEwen & Roper, 1994; Pope & Reynolds, 1997), spirituality (Strange, 2001), and values (Young & Elfrink, 1991) into their curricula. Graduate programs represent a relatively stable, convenient site for self-study, though the impact of these studies on the content and delivery of student affairs graduate preparation programs is not known, nor is it known how well master's programs prepare their graduates for the transition to full-time work.

Concern about the transition to work is evident in Magolda and Carnighi's (2004) edited volume *Job One: Experiences of New Professionals in Student Affairs*. While not strictly an empirical work, the book draws on narratives written by new professionals and analyses by established scholars and practitioners to offer insights for new professionals and their supervisors. Key themes that emerge echo those presented in Amey and Ressor's (2002) *Beginning Your Journey: A Guide for New Professionals*. Themes include: self-knowledge and openness to change, knowledge of institutional culture and politics, importance of professional networks, availability of good supervision, balancing theory and practice, and establishing a professional identity. Richmond and Sherman's (1991) study of graduate students and new professionals provides some empirical support for these themes.

In the 2005–06 academic year, Cilente et al. (2006) conducted a mixed-methods national study through the auspices of the American College Personnel Association's Standing Committee for Graduate Students and New Professionals to determine the self-reported professional development needs of new professionals (defined as those individuals in the field 5 years or less). Although the survey response rate was modest (27%), the 269 survey respondents and 35 interview participants provide a broad-based sample from which the professional development needs of novice practitioners can be reasonably postulated.

The six professional development needs ranked highest by respondents to an electronic survey were: (a) receiving adequate support, (b) understanding job expectations, (c) fostering student learning, (d) moving up in the field of student affairs, (e) enhancing supervision skills, and (f) developing multicultural competencies. Preferred delivery methods for meeting these needs included learning with a mentor; learning on their own; and attending campus, regional, or national workshops. Challenges for new professionals echoed themes from *Job One* and *Beginning Your Journey*, including understanding organizational culture, making the transition from graduate school to work, establishing a relationship with a mentor, and clarifying job expectations. Cilente et al. (2006) made recommendations for meeting needs and addressing challenges, with an eye toward improving the quality of professional life for early career practitioners.

At the heart of much research on graduate programs; on new professionals; and on new professionals' needs, challenges, and transition lies a concern—sometimes stated, sometimes tacit—about attrition from the field. Once individuals and institutions have invested substantial resources into master's degrees and job searches, to lose someone because of a poor institutional or vocational fit, dissatisfaction with a job, or some other reason may be seen as a loss for all. The student affairs attrition and job satisfaction literature is long established and updated periodically (e.g., Bender, 1980; Berwick, 1992; Evans, 1988; Lorden, 1998; Tull, 2006), and predicts that between 50% and 60% of new professionals leave the field before their fifth year. Scholars and practitioners (Harned & Murphy, 1998; Lorden, 1998; Saunders, Cooper, Winston, & Chernow, 2000) suggest that a better understanding of the needs of new professionals for orientation, good supervision, and staff development could ameliorate the degree of attrition to some extent. A movement toward synergistic supervision of new professionals seems especially promising in this regard and integrates adult learning and development theory into workplace practices for staff supervision and development (see Janosik et al., 2003; Saunders et al., 2000; Tull, 2006).

In spite of the availability of research about graduate preparation of new professionals, concerns about attrition from the field, and guidance on supervising new professionals, it has been more than 25 years since the publication of an open-ended study of the *experience* of new professionals (Rosen, Taube, & Wordsworth, 1980). Arguably, the student affairs workforce and higher education workplace has changed substantially in the last 25 years, and we wanted to know how first-year professionals were experiencing it. Would there be anything to add to the dominant research trinity of graduate preparation, job satisfaction/attrition, and supervision? The research question for this study, therefore, was: *How do master's level, full-time student affairs professionals experience their first year on the job?*

Method

Because we wanted to take a fresh look at student affairs professionals' first year on the job, we decided on qualitative methods for data collection and a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Creswell,

1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open-ended questioning and grounded theory analysis are well suited for studies where the goal is to explore a range of possible experiences among a similar group of participants (Creswell, 1998), as it was in our case.

Ten 2005 graduates from one student affairs master's program participated in this study. These ten responded to an invitation we issued to the 15 graduates who had begun full-time employment at the start of the study. Eight worked in residence life/housing; two worked in other areas. There were two men and eight women; nine were White and one was a person of color. They worked at private and public institutions, all 4-year; three were at religiously affiliated institutions where their own religious backgrounds were not that of the institutions'. All participants held 20-hour graduate assistantships while earning their master's degrees and had completed two or more semester-long practicum placements. The ten participants were representative of their graduating cohort in terms of race, gender, and assistantship/practicum experience. Full-time employment in residence life was slightly overrepresented by participants as compared to the total graduating cohort, in which six of fifteen graduates began working outside residence life (in, for example, academic advising, admissions, student union/activities, and so forth). The master's institution from which the sample graduated was a large, public research university with a well-established student affairs master's program that subscribed to the CAS Standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2006) and attracted a national student body. It is important to note that one of us (Renn) was a faculty member in this program and knew the participants well; the other (Hodges) was a doctoral student who had interacted frequently with some of the participants through department activities and professional association work.

Data collection took place from September 2005 to April 2006 in an electronic format consisting of a monthly question/prompt to which participants responded in an online course software package (similar to BlackBoard or WebCT). All participants received the same prompt; responses were confidential and not available to other participants. Examples of prompts include:

- Think back to when you were initially hired for your current position. Describe your hopes for and concerns about this new position.

- What has surprised you (good or bad) so far in your new job?
- Describe a challenge you've faced in your new job and how you resolved it. Also, if you'd like, describe a success and what contributed to it.
- Describe something you've learned since beginning your new job.
- Now that you're halfway through your first year, please reflect on how it's gone so far.
- Thinking back to what you learned at [university], what has contributed most to your work this year? What hasn't come into play yet?

Individual responses ranged from a few hundred to several hundred words per prompt, yielding a total of about 120 pages of text.

Data analysis was ongoing. We followed a grounded theory approach, beginning with open coding of each month's responses, moving into axial and selective coding to develop themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using a constant comparative strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we were able to integrate emerging themes into subsequent probes.

Trustworthiness (Creswell, 1998) was established at the levels of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The online data collection procedure ensured that we had an exact transcription of the participants' intended responses; there was no room for mistaken transcriptions or misheard responses. Participants had online access to their own past responses, and a few provided clarifications or updates or second thoughts to their own entries; all were invited to review their responses at any time. A measure of analytic trustworthiness derived from our separate analyses of the responses and initial open coding; we then compared codes and themes for congruence and dissonance, exploring each for underlying biases on our part. Interpretive trustworthiness came about through opportunities to share the findings with participants and other new professionals, who by and large reported that our interpretations reflected their experiences.

Limitations of the study derive primarily from the nature of the sample. Drawn from one master's program, the sample clearly cannot represent the experiences of all first year, master's level student affairs professionals, and possibly even less so the experiences of bachelor's or other level new professionals. An additional limitation lies in data collection, which was iterative from month to month (i.e., themes were fed back into future prompts), but involved no direct follow-up with each participant to clarify or deepen his or her responses, as there would be in a one-on-one verbal or online interview. Still, we believe that the findings can be brought to bear on a deeper understanding of the new professional experience.

Findings

Over the year of the study, it became clear that there were three overriding themes for new professionals: Relationships, Fit, and Competence. These themes played out over three distinct phases of the first year on the job: Pre-Employment and Orientation, Transition, and Settling In. In each theme, distinct experiences and emotions occurred in the three time phases, though each participant did not experience the phases at exactly the same time. Figure 1 summarizes the findings, on which we elaborate below in sections organized by themes from the first year on the job.

Relationships

Relationships formed in the Pre-Employment and Orientation phase formed the basis for transition to the new job and then evolved during the course of the first year. Supervisors, supervisees, students, mentors, colleagues, family, and friends were the most common sources of both positive and stressful relationships, and concern about relationships dominated some new professionals' thoughts on beginning their first jobs. Jeremy (all names are pseudonyms) wrote, "It's funny that my first hope/concern as a 'professional' was completely personal: Will they like me? This applied to my bosses, coworkers, peers, staff, and anyone/everyone I would encounter in my new position." Joy and in some cases a bit of surprise at being offered a job came through in these responses, as the new professionals described their reactions to their new colleagues:

Figure 1
Summary of Findings

Timing Issues	Pre-Employment & Orientation	Transition	Settling In
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipation of/hope for good relationships with peers and colleagues, based on job search and early interactions • Concern about relationships with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking for and expecting guidance from outside • Frustration in not having mentors easily available • Relief in good relationships; anxiety about poor ones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outsiders as collaborators and resources, not sole authorities • Awareness that responsibility for locating mentor lies with self • Relationships with students solidify
Fit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job search anxiety ends with relief over having a job—any job • Concerns about fit masked by busyness of starting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deeper awareness of culture • Experience incongruence with office, department, and/or institutional culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental awareness improves, but not always happy with institutional culture • Spring brings decision point about staying or job searching
Competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First job as “training ground” for career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See self as competent • See self as not competent • Question competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More aware of abilities and needs for training • Learning to articulate these needs to supervisor and others

I'm amazed at how much I like working with the people in my department. From the first day, the support and welcoming that I received has been amazing and I have always felt welcome to have questions, concerns or ideas. The people I work with have also been wonderful and wacky and have allowed tones of creativity. (Becky)

Ella's relationships compelled her to want to work hard and well: "My colleagues are incredibly supportive and have good high expectations. I find that I want to make them proud and represent the school well." At this early stage, supervisors were most often seen as supportive guides and cheerleaders; some of the "honeymoon" aspects of their relationships with just-hired new professionals had yet to wear off.

Another common early response was uncertainty about how *students* would respond to the new professionals: "I wasn't sure how the students would take to me, but I've been really surprised at how well it's gone" (Margie). Emily was "pleasantly surprised" by the students she advised: "I wasn't necessarily expecting them to be lazy or disinterested, but I was definitely not expecting them to be so diligent and responsible." Jeremy, a newcomer to residence life, had been concerned about his credibility with his student staff, but when they found themselves evacuated in a hurricane during training, he was able to rely on early success in relationship and credibility building. He wrote:

From day one, I could tell how much my staff believed in me and bought into my approach to residence life. I was very intentional about explaining how little I cared about what other staffs were doing and wanted them to genuinely appreciate who we were as a team, the great potential that existed in all of us, and how much we could accomplish if we took advantage of the many opportunities ahead of us. They believed me and I believed myself. And though things have only gotten better and relationships deeper since our initial meetings, it was those initial meetings that surprised me so much and really set the tone for the rest of the year so far.

How they related to students—and what students thought of them and their job performance—was a key concern of these ten new professionals.

The mid-year Transition phase was marked by concerns of several participants about expectations for relationships with supervisors and mentors. More precisely, they were frustrated that their supervisors were not acting as mentors, as participants had hoped and expected. Suzanne wrote, “An ongoing challenge that I am having is the lack of professional mentoring I am receiving from my direct supervisor.” Margie’s frustration was evident:

I am very surprised at the lack of guidance I am receiving from my supervisor. My supervisor has yet to show me that he cares about my professional growth. I get the impression that he cares very much about how I am doing my job, but he does not show concern for how I want to develop. My one-on-one meetings with him are entirely focused on whether or not I am following up with students and completing my administrative work. After being here for three months (including training) I have yet to have a conversation with my supervisor about what I want to learn about myself this year and how I want to grow. My interactions with him revolve around whether or not I am completing tasks correctly, and if I am not, him telling me how to do them correctly.

Margie was experiencing—or at least perceiving—a lack of focus on synergistic supervision (Janosik et al., 2003; Saunders et al., 2000; Tull, 2006), which is based on integrating the professional development needs of staff with meeting the needs of the organization.

Becky reported a similar experience but had moved one step further in separating her expectations of mentoring and supervision:

One challenge that I am still facing with in my position is finding a suitable mentor. My supervisor does not seem to have any investment in how I am developing professionally, so he is not someone from whom I would like to learn. I make these statements because, it is the beginning of November and we have yet to have a conversation about goals or what I would like to do in

the future. He seems more concerned with how I am doing my job now than how I can grow this year.

Whereas some experienced student affairs professionals might dismiss Becky's final thought (supervisor being more concerned about job performance than personal growth) as the result of self-centeredness that has been identified as a trait of the so-called millennial generation (see Janosik et al., 2003 for discussion of cross-generational supervision), it is also possible to understand this line as an important step in transition from graduate school to work. In graduate school, assistantship and practicum supervisors *were* mentors as part of a seamless learning environment. By distinguishing the roles of mentor and supervisor, Becky could identify where she might take responsibility for finding a mentor outside the relationship with her supervisor.

Relationships outside work also took on importance during the Transition phase. Emily noted, "My biggest challenge in the last three months of my new job has been leaving work at work and leaving it there early enough so that I still have valuable time each day with my friends and family." Similarly, Robin commented "My best choice to help with the transition is to get involved off campus after work. It helped me maintain a balance that I was quickly losing."

When participants were in the Settled In phase, responses were marked by even more interest in forming relationships outside the immediate work environment. Ella wrote:

I am looking forward to connecting more with other departments and just knowing more people on campus. I have begun to work with the Student Development grad program to help them get ready for their job search. In that I have made connections with faculty, staff, and grad students. I am also looking to contribute more with my coworkers, I feel like I have a lot to offer, and I want to make sure I don't feel like I have to defer to my more experienced colleagues.

Ella's professional self-confidence—which was not evident in the Pre-Employment and Orientation phase—provided a cornerstone on which she could build relationships and contribute across the institution.

Relationships were a key theme in the experience of the new professionals in our study. From the job offer through the first year, new professionals framed transition and adjustment through the relationships they formed and the relationships they lacked (mentors). It is worth noting that this cohort of graduates maintained (and still do) an electronic mail list (through Yahoo.com) that functioned as a sort of bridge from graduate school relationships into professional relationships, and the study itself acted as a relational buffer where they could reflect and communicate directly with a member of their graduate program faculty.

Fit

In addition to relationships, fit—with the institution and with the job—mattered to new professionals, before and after they began their new jobs. Several commented that they knew from advice received during the job search that “fit” was important; but some of the participants had only one job offer, so any concerns they had about fit were superseded by their concerns about not having a job. They took the one job they were offered. Even when they had more than one job offer, determining fit was a difficult task. Margie reflected:

Meeting people for a 1- or 2-day interview, it's hard to know what the people will be like and if I'll like working with them. . . . Most of all, I was afraid that I was about to leave the institution that was the best first for me, as I knowingly was about to be a part of an institution that was labeled the complete opposite.

Kelly, on the other hand, wrote, “I could tell that my new institution was the kind of place where people come to learn and develop, and that is something I valued.” This value was countered by concerns about the religious affiliation of the institution, which was not a part of Kelly's background or previous experience. As it turned out, an “ethic of care” was evident at every staff meeting at this institution, and while Kelly did not resonate with the religion's culture and history, she found that the ethic of care matched her commitment to students.

Personal fit was a preoccupation of new professionals in the Pre-Employment and Orientation phase. Margie wondered:

Will I connect with my new colleagues? Will I have a good staff?
Will I be able to understand the student culture? Will I learn my
way around the area? How will I get along with my supervisor?
Will I have a social life? What will it be like not going to class?

Some concerns about fit were masked early in the transition by the busy nature of the start of a new academic year. In a phone conversation with Renn outside the context of the study, one participant remarked, "Fit? What fit? I'm moving too fast to know." And concerns about fit hid behind concerns about building relationships and competence in the Pre-Employment and Orientation phase.

Following the rush of getting and then beginning the new job, the Transition phase brought an awareness of the reality of a good fit or a poor fit, both in the job and in the field of student affairs. Emily wrote:

The bottom line is that I love what I do and I work in an office of very competent people who care about students and I don't think you can ask for much more than that. In the end, I have been pleasantly surprised loving what I do and feeling like, 2 and a half months into my job, I made the right decision.

Kelly, at a religiously affiliated institution, was having a different experience: "I am constantly aware that I do not 'fit in' religiously here and the impact that has on the way I do my job."

Fit extended beyond the institution to the area in which it was located. Caroline, who identified as lesbian, was concerned about finding a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) community of which to be part. Not finding one in the small town in which her new institution was located, she still reflected, "So while I occasionally pine for the company of other LGBT folks, I couldn't ask for a more sensitive and supportive atmosphere." Throughout the year, she built connections off campus, but this one aspect of on-campus isolation persisted.

Once new professionals were Settled In, they began to make decisions about whether the institutional, geographic, and professional fit was right or the new job search season offered a second chance to get it right. Indeed, these three elements of fit contributed to three participants seeking (and getting) new jobs while seven participants decided

to stay put because of—or in spite of—fit. For example, Ella noted, “I am honestly surprised at how much I like this position. Initially I did not want to go into residence life, but it seems to be a good fit, at least at this institution.” Suzanne, on the other hand, wrote:

When I graduated from [master’s university] I was really looking forward to being in an environment that enhanced what I learned in the classroom and forced me to make meaning of my work, asked me to connect back to theory, current issues in higher ed, etc. But this is not happening.

Awareness of fit in the student affairs profession emerged for some participants. Emily wrote:

I can say with no hesitation that I love working with students and I don’t have a single regret about getting a Master’s in student affairs. I am quite convinced that it has paved the way for most of my successes in the last six months.

Kelly reflected differently on the field:

I realize that so much of your first job and the first year of that job is treading water. It is not learning the strokes or perfecting your breathing; it is staying afloat through staffing changes, angry parents, and the never-ending pile of paperwork. . . . I think the hardest reality that I had to face this semester was that so much of student affairs is treading water until you need to save someone’s life. The time when you are treading water is boring and tedious, but the time when you save someone and truly make a difference in their lives is the purpose for the job.

In spite of “boring and tedious” times, Kelly concluded like Emily that student affairs is the field for her. Other participants echoed this theme. As of April no participants had decided that student affairs was not the field for them, though three were seeking better institutional fits.

Competence

At all three phases of the first-year experience, competence for these new professionals rested primarily on issues of job training, skills, and

knowledge. Having the basic skills to get the job off the ground—open a building, do a staff training, run an academic advising session—were paramount in the Pre-Employment and Orientation phase. Important, too, was conveying a sense of competence. Becky wrote:

I really wanted to do well in the position. I was so worried that I wasn't good enough, or didn't know enough, or that I wouldn't meet up to their expectations or that people would be disappointed that they had chosen me.

Emily "hoped that [she] would be the type of advisor that made students comfortable, but also challenged them." August and September were busy months on the Yahoo list, as several of these participants (and their nonparticipating fellow graduates) swapped tips for RA training, teaching leadership skills to student groups, and running LGBT "Safe Zone" programs. Being—and seeming—competent was an underlying theme of the requests and comments on the e-mail list.

Reliance on this established network not only demonstrated the benefits of the "Net Generation" moving into the workplace (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), but also illuminated a phenomenon common among participants: few had received the training they felt they needed to do their jobs. Echoing findings of Rosen et al. (1980), orientation to the new job is paramount for job performance and confidence of new professionals. At the end of the term Caroline noted:

It is a lot to learn a whole new system, not to mention adjust to a new state, new people, etc. We did not have a lot of summer training, so much of the semester felt like I was "flying by the seat of my pants."

Kelly wrote, "I was surprised when I first got here and my boss basically handed me the keys and said, 'Here you go, good luck.'" And Ella, who had never worked in residence life before taking her position as an area coordinator, wrote, "I have been a little surprised about the amount of autonomy I have in my building, especially with so little experience." She added:

I was also hopeful that I would receive extensive training before being thrown into my job. I was concerned that I would not adjust

well to living on campus, and being available 24/7 to students definitely freaked me out. I was concerned that I had no formal counseling or judicial training.

In the Transition phase, participants wrote a bit more broadly on their competence, seeing where they felt competent and where they had learning to do. Caroline reflected:

I love all this, and can feel myself growing a lot. I also have days where I feel insecure and am unsure of my niche in the department and on campus, but I know I will figure it out. It takes me a while to open up to people and to get over the “new job insecurities.”

Ella was aware of her strengths and weaknesses:

I have been surprised at how easily I have stepped into this position. Without previous residence life experience, I thought it would be much harder, but my organizational skills and common sense have helped me through the transition. My lack of counseling skills is definitely something I was surprised to find out would make me apprehensive about some aspects of my job.

Comparing themselves to peers was one way to self-assess competence, and new professionals sometimes found themselves lacking. Robin wrote:

Overall, I am very satisfied with my progress so far, but I still feel like I am less than those who have more experience. Perhaps that is a confidence thing. I just know that I look to my peers a great deal.

Ella, though, compared herself favorably to a colleague: “I tend to compare myself with the other new hire I began with, and I am confident that I have adjusted very well to my position compared to that person.” The Transition phase was thus marked by contrasts between feeling competent and feeling lacking in competence and confidence.

When participants reached the Settled In phase, confidence and experience were beginning to overcome feelings of incompetence. Margie wrote, “The skills that I’ve developed and things that I’ve learned from

this past semester will help me start fresh next year knowing things not only about the institution but also about the position and its expectations.” Robin made connections back to the graduate program, noting, “I feel like I am finally understanding how to incorporate all that I learned in school with how the real world works. The politics, the real people rather than hypothetical theories, and the like.” Caroline projected her confidence into her second year: “I think next year I will be much more confident in what I am doing, and more able to focus on professional development and long-term goals.”

In many ways, these new professionals had found their confidence and their voices. They were able, as Kegan (1994) would note, to distinguish subject and object in terms of self and job; professional identity could be separated from professional competence. This development highlights the contrast between the Pre-Employment and Orientation phase (“They hired me, therefore I am competent.”) and a more complex understanding of self as professional (“I have confidence to address my strengths and weaknesses in a work setting.”). From the Settled In stance, participants could envision and plan their own professional development. It is worth noting that the Cilente et al. (2006) study was conducted during the time frame corresponding to the Transition and Settled In phases of the new professional experience, which likely influenced how survey respondents and interview participants answered questions about their needs for professional development.

Theme Development and Interaction Across Time

The Pre-Employment and Orientation phase, which lasted about a month into the job for most participants, was characterized by anticipation of good relationships (“They like me!”), sense of relief at getting a job, and some anxiety about “getting along” with students. Elements of job performance were not at the center of concern, except where individuals had taken a job in a new field (e.g., someone with no residence life experience being hired as a hall director). There was a sense of new beginnings and feeling special that cut across relationships, fit, and competencies.

The Transition phase was marked by concerns about finding a mentor, seeking approval and support from outside, and beginning to

question fit and competence. Lasting 2 to 4 months, this phase brought questions about staying at the institution, in the functional area (e.g., residence life, advising), and/or in the field of student affairs. At the same time, new professionals were discovering that they did—at least sometimes—know what they were doing, even if they were not sure everyone around them agreed.

The Settling In phase brought renewed self-confidence in new professionals' ability to get the job done and to adjust to the new location. At this point in the year, which was typically after the start of the second semester, new professionals were establishing relationship networks and beginning to get their feet on the ground. They were looking forward to recruiting new colleagues to join them the next year; and in three cases, they were looking at the job market to find a position closer to home and/or closer to their professional commitments. These three were "settling in" as student affairs professionals, just not at the institutions where they were starting their careers.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Findings both reflect and expand on existing literature on new professionals. Graduate preparation, job satisfaction, and supervision featured in the first-year experience; but there was also more going on than the issues of transition, job mastery, professional identity, and work-life balance than Rosen et al. (1980) identified 25 years before our study. Even the recent report on new professional needs (Cilente et al., 2006) fails to capture the development across time of the new professional experience, and the last longitudinal study of new professionals (Richmond & Sherman, 1991) focused their surveys in ways that limited responses mainly to issues of graduate preparation and placement. A particular contribution of our study is the framing of a basic pattern of new professional transition and adjustment. The study suggests several areas for practice and for further research. We present these implications in three areas: preparing graduate students to be new professionals, being a new professional, and supervising new professionals.

Preparing New Professionals

The findings indicate that graduate preparation should emphasize

individual responsibility for professional development, as well as skills and dispositions related to cultivating mentors. For most participants the expectation that the environment would cater to their need for mentoring caused significant angst. Kelly wrote:

I know in classes we spoke about the importance of seeking out a mentor that could help us to adjust and brainstorm problem solving strategies. When I got here I immediately began to look for someone who could act as this mentor and have been searching unsuccessfully ever since.

Providing a more realistic picture of the process of cultivating mentors and the realism that *supervisor* does not equal *mentor* may help to ease this process. Richmond and Sherman (1991) noted the importance of mentoring in helping new professionals translate theory to practice, and Cilente et al. (2006) called for mentoring to be a centerpiece of meeting the professional development needs of new staff. Unless graduate preparation programs help students understand how to go about acquiring a mentor, these needs may remain unmet.

Findings also suggest that graduate students would benefit from more discussion of the potential impact of organizational culture on their transition into a new position and their ability to be a change agent in their new environment. In discussions of the environment, particular attention should be paid to the impact of incongruence between the individual's characteristics and the institution's characteristics. For example, one of the three participants at a religiously affiliated institution recommended more discussion of "the impact that religion has on higher education. . . . We spoke about religion sometimes in class but being at a large public university I think it was difficult to put it into context." As noted earlier, institutional fit was not a concern relegated only to those at religious institutions.

Another implication of the findings is that preparation programs need to present a realistic picture of how positional power shapes influence. Jeff reflected on how case studies in the graduate program often assigned students to the role of dean or vice president, but

We didn't talk about the fact that in a new professional position, you don't have the influence of these [senior] positions and it can

be inappropriate to make decisions like you are a director of residence life when you are a hall director. I feel the program could have addressed how to be an agent of change from a low position of influence.

Some early impatience with systems and structures might have been attenuated, as might feelings of incompetence in the face of systemic problems that, in fact, one hall director cannot resolve on his or her own.

Organizational culture and positional power are key themes in *Beginning Your Journey* (Amey & Ressor, 2002) and *Job One* (Magolda & Carnighi, 2004), yet these new professionals had not taken them in during their graduate program. Mentoring is a key recommendation of the *Report on the New Professional Needs Study* (Cilente et al., 2006), yet these new professionals did not know how to go about finding a mentor and were frustrated that their supervisors could not or would not fill this role. It is possible that no amount of addressing these issues in the master's program would have made the transition to work easier for study participants; but it is also possible that taking on these issues head on in both theoretical and practical ways (e.g., courses, practicum supervision) could facilitate the transition into the field.

Being a New Professional

The experiences of study participants suggest that recent graduates should focus on finding balance and being proactive to enhance their experience as new professionals. Although several participants mentioned the need for balance, for most, it took a back seat to concerns about fitting in and appearing competent. A better model might be to follow the examples of Emily and Robin, who sought opportunities to spend time with family, friends, and off-campus community; and Caroline who found an LGBT community away from work. In any case, new professionals need to know that the relationships that provide balance do not happen automatically in a new job and new town; they must take initiative to create and sustain whatever involvements they require to achieve some sense of balance.

As new professionals shift from the Transition phase to the Settled In phase, they realized that they could be proactive and take individual

responsibility for their experience to fill in some of the professional and personal gaps they felt were present in their job situations. To remedy her perceived lack of professional mentoring, Suzanne took charge of her experience. "So, to compensate for this, I have volunteered to sit on several committees and projects that have allowed me to see how decision making works at [my institution]." To address her need for personal connections and professional development, Becky took action, "I also resolved this proactively by planning social outings for everyone. In addition to planning regular weekend activities, I developed a program . . . where Student Affairs professionals gather once a week to discuss issues in Student Affairs over coffee." It is worth noting that Suzanne's and Becky's initiatives are exactly the types of activities that can lead to cultivating the mentoring relationships they sought—but did not find—with their supervisors.

Supervising New Professionals

As noted early in this article, Janosik et al. (2003), Cilente et al. (2006), and Tull (2006) address important aspects of mentoring new professionals; and we will not repeat their recommendations here. Based on our findings, however, we would add that supervisors might assist new professionals in adjusting to their new environment and developing by having clear goals for supervision; clarifying roles in supervision and/or mentoring relationships; and helping new professionals read the organizational context, especially as related to supervision, relationships with colleagues, and personal responsibility for professional development. Explicit attention to orienting new professionals—or providing some indication of where orientation and training can occur—might facilitate the transition. Making clear statements, during the hiring process and once the job is begun, about where responsibility for professional development lies might also help new professionals understand their role in this important process.

Areas for Further Inquiry

This study traced ten new professionals from beginning their jobs through mid-spring. It begins to outline what that experience entails and suggested how graduate faculty, new professionals, and supervisors might begin to address challenges faced in the first year on the job. It also raises additional questions that have not been explored

empirically. First, because it was based on a limited sample (ten graduates from one master's program) yet had compelling findings in three main themes (relationships, fit, and competence), it suggests that further exploration of these issues with a larger sample could shed more light on the experience of new professionals in student affairs.

Second, it raises questions about whose responsibility, if anyone's, it is to ensure a smooth transition to the workplace from graduate school. Janosik et al. (2003) and Tull (2006) recommend a synergistic supervision approach that can meet staff and organizational needs. Cilente et al. (2006) imply that it is largely up to the organization and profession to meet the needs of new professionals, and certainly there is some evidence from this study that there are substantial unmet needs, yet there is also evidence that left to their own devices new professionals have agency and skills to take responsibility for their own development. Baxter Magolda (2001) proposed that well-meaning professionals may in fact limit undergraduate's development of self-authorship by smoothing their path too much; we wonder if the same might be said about stifling professional development of new staff. A study that explores what balance of challenge and support—and what those elements look like for different new professionals—is needed could provide evidence to support synergistic supervision or some other model of supervising *and mentoring* new staff into independent, self-regulating professionals who can be responsible for their own and others' development in the field.

Ultimately, the professional fates of the ten new professionals in this study are up to them. How they negotiate their second—and third and fourth—years in student affairs remains to be seen. Statistically, only about half will still be in the field in 2010. By then, they will likely be supervising new professionals themselves. Will they remember their frustration at supervisors who would not be mentors? Will they remember that they were handed a set of keys and left alone to figure out how to do their jobs? And will they remember how hard it was to know ahead of time how good or poor the institutional fit would really be? We like to think that with *Job One, Beginning Your Journey, Report on New Professional Needs Study*, and studies like this one, those experiences and lessons might not be forgotten by graduate faculty, supervisors of new professionals, and those recent graduates who are about to make the transition into their first student affairs jobs.

References

- Amey, M. J., & Ressor, L. M. (2002). *Beginning your journey: A guide for new professionals in student affairs*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Bender, B. E. (1980). Job satisfaction in student affairs. *NASPA Journal*, 18(2), 3–9.
- Berwick, K. R. (1992). Stress among student affairs administrators: The relationship of personal characteristics and organizational variables to work-related stress. *Journal of College Student Development*, 33, 11–10.
- Cilente, K., Henning, G., Skinner Jackson, J., Kennedy, D., & Sloan, T. (2006). *Report on the new professional needs study*. Washington, DC.: American College Personnel Association. Retrieved December 11, 2006, from <http://www.myacpa.org/research/newprofessionals.php>
- Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. (2006). *CAS professional standards for higher education* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Engstrom, C. M. (1997). Integrating information technology into student affairs graduate programs. In C. M. Engstrom & K. W. Kruger (Eds.), *Using technology to promote student learning: Opportunities for today and tomorrow* (New Directions for Student Services No. 78, pp. 59–70). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Evans, N. J. (1988). Attrition of student affairs professionals: A review of the literature. *Journal of College Student Development*, 29, 19–24.
- Flowers, L. A., & Howard-Hamilton, M. F. (2002). A qualitative study of graduate students' perceptions of diversity issues in student affairs preparation programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43, 119–123.
- Harned, P. J., & Murphy, M. C. (1998). Creating a culture of development for the new professionals. In W. A. Bryan & R. A. Schwartz (Eds.), *Strategies for staff development: Personal and professional education for the 21st century* (New Directions for Student Services No. 84, pp. 45–53). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Herdlein, R. J. (2004). Survey of chief student affairs officers regarding relevance of graduate preparation of new professionals. *NASPA Journal*, 42(1), 51–71.
- Hirt, J. B. (2006). *Where you work matters: Student affairs administrators at different types of institutions*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Hodges, J. P., Renn, K. A., Paul, R., Maker, R., & Munsey, M. (2006, March). *Preparation versus reality: Reflections on being a student affairs practitioner*. Presented at the American College Personnel Association Annual Convention, Indianapolis, IN.
- Janosik, S. M., Creamer, D. G., Hirt, J. B., Winston, R. B., Saunders, S. A., & Cooper, D. L. (Eds.). (2003). *Supervising new professionals in student affairs: A guide for practitioners*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kretovics, M. (2002). Entry level competencies: What student affairs administrators consider when screening candidates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43, 912–920.
- Lorden, L. P. (1998). Attrition in the student affairs profession. *NASPA Journal*, 35, 207–216.
- Lovell, C. D., & Kosten, L. A. (2000). Skills, knowledge, and personal traits necessary for success as a student affairs administrator: A meta-analysis of thirty years of research. *NASPA Journal*, 37, 353–369.
- Magolda, P. M., & Carnighi, J. E. (Eds.). (2004). *Job one: Experiences of new professionals in student affairs*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- McEwen, M. K., & Roper, L. D. (1994). Interracial experiences, knowledge, and skills of master's degree students in graduate programs in student affairs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35, 81–87.
- Oblinger, D. G., & Oblinger, J. L. (Eds.). (2005). *Educating the Net Generation*. Denver, CO: EDUCAUSE. Retrieved April 20, 2006, from <http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen>
- Palmer, C. J. (1995). Graduate preparation of residence hall directors: The addition and subtraction dilemma. *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 25, 5–8.

- Pope, R. L., & Reynolds, A. L. (1997). The student affairs core competencies: Integrating multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38, 266–277.
- Renn, K. A., & Zeligman, D. M. (2005). Learning about technology and student affairs: Outcomes of an online immersion. *Journal of College Student Development* 46, 547–555.
- Renn, K. A., Jessup Anger, E. R., & Hodges, J. P. (2007, April). First year on the job: Themes from the National Study of New Professionals in Student Affairs. Presented at the American College Personnel Association/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Joint Meeting, Orlando, FL.
- Richmond, J., & Sherman, K. J. (1991). Student development preparation and placement: A longitudinal study of graduate students' and new professionals' experiences. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32, 8–16.
- Rosen, J. A., Taube, S. R., & Wordsworth, E. L. (1980). The first professional year: Interviews with new professionals at SUNY-Stony Brook. *NASPA Journal*, 17(3), 52–59.
- Saunders, S. A., Cooper, D. L., Winston, R. B., & Chernow, E. (2000). Supervising staff in student affairs: Exploration of the synergistic approach. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(2), 181–192.
- Strange, C. (2001). Spiritual dimensions of graduate preparation in student affairs. *New Directions for Student Services*, 95, 57–67.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Tull, A. (2006). Synergistic supervision, job satisfaction, and intention to turnover of new professionals in student affairs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47, 465–477.
- Young, R., & Elfrink, V. (1991). Values education in student affairs graduate programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32, 109–115.