“FINDING CALM IN THE CHAOS”: THE INFLUENCE OF YOGA PRACTICE ON
THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES OF WHITE STUDENT AFFAIRS MOTHERS

A Chapter Style Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership

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“FINDING CALM IN THE CHAOS”: THE INFLUENCE OF YOGA PRACTICE ON THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES OF WHITE STUDENT AFFAIRS MOTHERS

By Jennifer Kosciw Duffield

We recommend acceptance of this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the candidate’s requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership.

The candidate has completed the oral defense of the dissertation.

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ABSTRACT


A culture that supports student affairs educators to engage in holistic wellness behaviors, as espoused by student affairs professional competencies, is not engrained in student affairs work, as capitalistic, patriarchal, and white supremacist systems prevent this from occurring. This cultural barrier creates unrealistic expectations around work and wellness for student affairs mothers. The purpose of this feminist narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. The White student affairs mothers in this study who had an established yoga practice reported a lack of representation and support in the workplace. They described how they maintain their yoga practice, the positive impact of yoga on their holistic wellness, and how their practice constructively influenced interactions with colleagues and students, and their approach to stress management, leadership, and their mindset at work. Findings suggest that White student affairs mothers challenged capitalistic and patriarchal norms in higher education by committing to a regular yoga practice, which also promoted an integration of engaged pedagogy in their work. Despite these positive outcomes, institutions of higher education must invest resources to dismantle capitalistic and patriarchal expectations that limit the success and growth of student affairs mothers.
DEDICATION

To all the student affairs mothers who—since March 2020—have wondered how they would get through another day:

May you be safe.

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you live with ease.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since I began the Student Affairs Administration and Leadership (SAAL) Ed.D. program at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL) in May 2019, my life, and the lives of everyone around the world, shifted in unimaginable ways. Needless to say, I could not have arrived here—with a completed dissertation—without the support and guidance of many people with whom I have had the honor of finding myself in community in some form over the last three years.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many student affairs educators engage undergraduate and graduate students in training, programs, and services that cater to improving their holistic wellness during their educational experience at an institution of higher education. The same cannot be said for university leadership and human resources creating an environment that supports the holistic wellness of student affairs educators. Institutions of higher education are patriarchal, gendered organizations that are reluctant to implement structural change to upend the harmful practices to which women in particular are subjected (Acker, 1990; Chandhok, 2020; Fotaki, 2020). Women in work settings take on extra emotional labor (Quaye et al., 2019), which Sambile (2020) defined as “the managing of emotions and the performing of actions for capital” (p. 145). Women of color in particular take on even more emotional labor to benefit White people and also face racial battle fatigue, which is “exhaustion that people of color feel from repeated exposure to racism, as well as its negative impact on their emotional, physiological, and psychological health and wellbeing” (Quaye et al., 2019, p. 95).

Emotional labor and racial battle fatigue are just two examples of why women in student affairs face burnout, chronic stress, fatigue, and even more severe health concerns which could reasonably cause some to leave the profession altogether. In addition to these challenges, some women who are mothers choose to leave their roles as student affairs educators due to conflict between their roles as a mother and an employee; lack of
support, supervision, and flexibility to care for children; and low pay and long hours (Hebreard, 2010; Waltrip, 2012). Many student affairs mothers who remain in the profession struggle to create time for wellness practices as they balance competing priorities and sacrifice their own wellness and hobbies to meet the needs of others at home, at work, or in their communities (Bailey, 2011; Lee, 2015; Supple, 2007). Despite its own self-professed professional competencies, the student affairs profession continues to perpetuate ideal worker norms that expect women who are mothers to approach work as if they do not have children (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016).

**Problem Statement**

In the Personal and Ethical Foundations competency for student affairs educators, ACPA-College Student Educators International and NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2015) highlighted the importance of healthy habits, stress-management, building healthy relationships, and engaging in thoughtful reflection. Given the workload and stress that many student affairs professionals take on, achieving this competency is important to the sustainability and longevity of the profession. However, a widespread culture to engage in this type of self-care or holistic wellness behavior is not yet engrained in student affairs work.

Squire and Nicolazzo (2019) assert that “the value of hard work permeates throughout the field as does the contradictory value of self-care…but never shall the two balance in meaningful ways” (p. 7). Capitalistic, patriarchal, and white supremacist systems that control institutions of higher education currently prevent this balance from occurring. For student affairs mothers, this results in an institution expecting them to give their all as a worker while they are simultaneously expected to mother as if they do not
have a job (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). Making time for wellness practices seems like an impossible feat, and yet some student affairs mothers are able to push against these systemic challenges by not only dedicating time to their wellness, but also considering how their wellness practice positively influences their work.

**Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

Currently, few publications examine the wellness practices of student affairs mothers and the effect these practices can have on their work experiences. Existing literature about student affairs mothers either examines why they leave the field (Hebreard, 2010; Waltrip, 2012) or it suggests that self-care is important to work-life balance (Courtney, 2014; DeMinck, 2017), but nowhere does it examine the impact of specific practices on wellness and professional experiences. This study sought to fill that gap in the literature by centering the voices of women who have established successful wellness practices. The purpose of this feminist narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the life stories of student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice?
2. What compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga as a wellness practice?
3. How do student affairs mothers sustain a yoga practice?
4. What connections, if any, do student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences?

To answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative study that is further described in the next section.
Overview of the Research Design

This qualitative study grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology used narrative inquiry to center the voices of 10 White student affairs mothers who have established successful wellness practices through yoga. Feminist standpoint epistemology calls researchers to “(1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and (2) apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change” (Brooks, 2007, p. 55). Narrative inquiry is one qualitative methodology that aligns with feminist standpoint epistemology. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), narrative inquiry “assumes that people construct their realities through narrating their stories” (p. 157). Narrative inquiry asks participants to share their lived experiences so that the researcher can develop an understanding of individual stories while simultaneously identifying a more holistic narrative woven through all participant stories (Jones et al., 2014). As a data collection method, it was appropriate for this study because it seeks to understand a sociological question related to the professional experiences of a narrowly defined population, student affairs mothers.

The design and methodology for this study sought to identify student affairs mothers who had an established yoga practice. The criteria for participants in this study were self-identified women in the United States who were student affairs educators and who were also mothers. A student affairs educator is an individual who has earned a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs or a related field and who has completed at least one year of full-time work in student affairs and continues to work in student affairs. Student affairs roles could encompass positions that fall under the student affairs or student life umbrellas at various two-year or four-year public or private
institutions of higher education in the United States. Participants must have had an established personal yoga practice that took place either at home (independently or with the use of online video instruction) or through a community setting (gym, yoga studio, park district, etc.) at least once a week for at least 10 consecutive weeks. Participants must have identified as a mother to one or more children between the ages of newborn to 17 years old and with whom they currently lived.

Participants were recruited through purposeful criterion and snowball sampling via specific social media groups for student affairs mothers and a community for women within a student affairs professional organization. Contact with participants in these communities included an invitation to participate in the study with a brief description of the research and a link to a prospective participant demographic survey that collected initial information about interested participants to help me determine if someone met the research criteria. I had hoped to identify at least eight to twelve participants for this study, and ultimately had 10 participants who identified as White student affairs mothers.

Data collection occurred through the use of two semi-structured interviews and written journal responses from each participant. After participants were selected, they were invited to complete an introductory meeting with me, followed by an initial semi-structured life story interview (Kim, 2016) focused on their background and identities, what made them pursue a yoga practice, and how they sustain their yoga practice. Upon completion of this initial interview, participants were asked to complete a weekly journal prompt once a week for four weeks to engage in reflection regarding their yoga practice and professional experiences. Participants were then asked to participate in a second and
final semi-structured interview focused on the connections between their yoga practice and their professional experiences.

Data analysis occurred through narrative analysis, also known as a paradigmatic mode of analysis (Kim, 2016). Through this type of analysis, I reviewed the narrative data to identify common themes and prominent concepts found in the participants’ narratives and journal entries; I then organized these themes under several categories, using the participant stories as data (Kim, 2016). These categories stemmed from the foci identified by the research questions—life stories, reasons for engaging in a yoga practice, strategies to sustain a yoga practice, and links between their yoga practice and professional experiences. Additionally, given that all of the selected participants identified as White women, a fifth category regarding whiteness and yoga emerged in the data. I did not seek to identify solely White participants, but this common racial identity became worthy of analysis and discussion based on what was said and unsaid by the participants related to their whiteness and their yoga practices. An in-depth review of the research design is included in Chapter III. Now, I turn to an explanation of why it was important to pursue this research and what benefits it offers.

**Rationale and Significance**

This study was important to pursue for several reasons. Existing literature places an emphasis on student affairs mothers’ work-life balance and there are few studies that focus on student affairs mothers’ accomplishments in the workplace. This study also embarked on a new research focus related to student affairs mothers by using narrative inquiry to collect stories from women who engage in a wellness practice through yoga and make connections between their yoga practice and their professional experiences.
The purpose of this study was to center student affairs mothers’ wellness and their contributions as a student affairs educator. It created space for student affairs mothers to share positive stories of their wellness and professional life. This is important because centering positive wellness stories of women who are marginalized in patriarchal, gendered student affairs settings also challenges the capitalistic expectation of productivity. Squire and Nicolazzo (2019) wrote that “when we center our humanness, we may begin to see that self-care ought to be an ongoing practice that radically changes our engagement with work and notions of ‘productivity’” (p. 9, emphasis in original).

Furthermore, this study offers several benefits. It provides a counternarrative to existing literature by demonstrating how student affairs mothers successfully integrate a wellness practice into their lives. In existing literature, student affairs mothers often engaged in self-sacrificing behavior and placed the needs of others before their own self-care (Bailey, 2011; Broghammer, 2016; Fochtman, 2010; Lee, 2015). This study focused on how student affairs mothers integrate yoga practice into their lives despite the numerous obligations they hold. Beyond this, the purpose of this study was to explore the influence of yoga practice on student affairs mothers’ professional experiences. Since the women in this study made meaningful connections between their professional work and their yoga practice—such as applying some of the principles of yoga to their work as a student affairs educator—there is potential for the workplace environment and the student experience to improve.

Finally, this study created the possibility for future research to advance the efforts outlined in A Bold Vision Forward: A Framework for the Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization, which ACPA developed to call student affairs educators and
faculty to engage in practices that create racial justice in and decolonize our institutions of higher education (Quaye et al., 2018). The Imperative calls student affairs educators to build self-awareness, practice love in our work, see our capacity to intervene and disrupt systems of oppression, engage with humility, and center compassion and healing among other calls to action (Quaye et al., 2018). Many of the actions identified in the Imperative align with actions and behaviors that yoga practice can offer. Insights regarding connections student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experience have the potential to demonstrate to the profession that giving time to engage in a wellness practice that includes yoga can have a profound influence on our work and our goals to achieve racial justice and decolonization. My own yoga practice has influenced how I have approached my work as a student affairs educator, which I will explore in the next section.

**Researcher Positionality**

My role as a student affairs educator led me to yoga in the fall of 2016. During the 2016-2017 academic year, the institution at which I worked as a student affairs educator selected a new president to lead us out of a financial crisis that peaked the year prior. My own role was in flux as I transitioned from working for one interim supervisor to another as senior leadership members left due to the presidential transition. I felt immense stress about my responsibilities, particularly those related to Title IX issues, because no one else was focused on them and I had only been involved with the work for a year. Amidst these work challenges, my fiancé and I were planning a wedding, renovating the kitchen in our new house on the weekends, and my future mother-in-law had suddenly become
rather ill. I felt tired, angry, directionless, and burnt out. I started to contemplate if student affairs was really where I belonged long-term.

In my free time, I began practicing yoga at home through online videos. After I felt comfortable with the basics of *asana*, or physical yoga practice, I asked my fiancé for a gift certificate for Christmas to try classes at a yoga studio near work. In January 2017, I committed to practicing yoga at least two to three times a week at that studio. My regular practice soon became a ritual I looked forward to after leaving work and before going home. For the next two and a half years, yoga was a regular part of my week. It became the primary way I found wellness physically and mentally. It eased my anxiety, allowed me to identify and let go of negative emotions, and helped me move through grief when I lost my mother-in-law. I began to notice I was a calmer leader at work, and I stressed less when difficult situations arose. I set a positive example for my staff members by leaving work at a decent hour to take care of myself before going home. It transformed the way I approached supervision and leadership with my team. It led me to engage in deeper questions about my role in upholding and dismantling systems of oppression as a White, cisgender woman. When I became pregnant, I continued to attend some of my typical classes and added prenatal classes, and my yoga practice contributed to my positive labor experience when I birthed my daughter in October 2019.

However, after her birth I had a difficult time returning to my practice. After physically recovering from labor, I had to learn to integrate being a new mother with being a wife, a full-time student affairs educator, and a full-time doctoral student. Finding time to return to my yoga mat became difficult. Much of what I felt I worked hard to undo through yoga quickly returned—the anxiety, stress, lack of focus, fluctuating
emotions, and disconnection from others around me. By mid-March of 2020, a little over a month after my maternity leave ended and I returned to work, the COVID-19 global pandemic led to shelter-in-place orders in my area. My husband and I cared for our infant daughter during the day while we juggled remote work. My ability to return to yoga practice further diminished, at a time when I knew I could benefit from it the most. As the summer approached, I began to find time to practice again at home and started attending an outdoor yoga class once a week. However, as the pandemic continued through the fall of 2020 and I transitioned from working on campus to working at home again, reintegrating my yoga practice into my weekly routine continued to be a challenge.

Intertwined with my journey toward establishing my yoga practice and becoming a mother are my other identities that influence how I approach this research. I am a White, cisgender woman currently living without a physical disability. Within the context of student affairs educators, I fall within the demographic majority of people who hold positions in student affairs (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). These three identities also make the vast majority of yoga studios accessible to me since yoga practice in the United States has been colonized and designed to serve this demographic. My exposure to yoga over the last several years through various methods of delivery, studios, teachers, and styles of asana practice has allowed me to critically examine how well yoga is honored in relation to its Vedic roots within and beyond asana practice and not just appropriated and marketed as a self-care practice situated in a capitalist culture.

My upbringing has further influenced my perceptions of wellness as a woman and now as a mother. I was raised in a middle-class household by two parents who did not complete their bachelor’s degrees but worked incredibly hard to pave the way for my
younger brother and me to complete a higher education. When I was younger my mother worked long hours (sometimes even bringing work home with her), took care of household tasks, and was always present for my extracurricular activities as a student. I rarely remember seeing my mother taking time to engage in wellness practices for herself. As I matured, furthered my education, and started my career in student affairs, I took on a similar role of constantly working, achieving, and being present for others I cared about in my life. Since I became a mother, I have taken a step back to examine how much my self-worth is tied to my productivity and have begun pushing against the patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy in which I am enveloped in higher education and other personal realms of my life that keep me from centering my own wellness as a woman and mother.

My experience as a student affairs educator and new mother made me wonder how other student affairs mothers found time to engage in wellness practices like yoga. How do student affairs mothers find time to sustain a yoga practice? How do they overcome the pressure to self-sacrifice on behalf of work and family and instead put their wellness first? Do they draw from their yoga practice in their professional experiences? My positionality and experiences drew me to these research questions and also caused me to have particular assumptions as I designed this study.

**Researcher Assumptions**

There were several assumptions I held as a researcher designing this study that could have influenced my ability to draw conclusions from the data I collected. First, student affairs mothers work in gendered organizations, meaning that most institutions of higher education in the United States were designed to further educational attainment for
White men led by faculty and administration comprised of men (Renn & Reason, 2013). Although most institutions have expanded their workforce and student populations to be accessible to other gender identities beyond men, the patriarchal roots of these institutions, in combination with the other hierarchical and patriarchal systems that interplay with higher education today, reinforce gendered organizations. Patriarchy and sexism are both overt and covert methods used to control women in higher education (Hoffman, 2011).

As a result of these gendered organizations interplaying with gender roles that society upholds for mothers, another assumption was that student affairs mothers juggle multiple responsibilities. Existing literature about student affairs mothers shows that they feel as though there is not enough time in the day to meet all the demands they face at home and at work (Supple, 2007), including supporting various levels of staff development and needs and meeting competing deadlines (Vasquez, 2012) while also managing mothering commitments related to preparing food for home and children’s schools, developing a schedule for children, and managing their care and activities (Supple, 2007). The literature also demonstrates that student affairs mothers identify a need to self-sacrifice for the sake of others (Bailey, 2011; Broghammer, 2016; Fochtman, 2010; Lee, 2015).

Based on this information and the expectation that student affairs mothers should have “a unified sense of self and the sense of being ‘balanced’” (Lee, 2015, p. 131), a third assumption was that student affairs mothers seek out yoga as a wellness practice for various reasons, and that most White yoga practitioners are introduced to the practice for its physical benefits through asana. Some student affairs mothers may have established
their yoga practice before becoming a mother, while some may have begun their yoga practice after. The differing life experiences and career trajectories of student affairs mothers suggest that each mother may have her own reason for seeking out yoga. Despite what leads them to pursue yoga as a wellness practice, a fourth assumption was that student affairs mothers must engage certain tactics to maintain a yoga practice. Given their multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and often in their communities, student affairs mothers must use specific strategies to delegate and protect time for themselves to engage in yoga practice.

A fifth assumption was that student affairs mothers could identify some benefits from their yoga practice in their professional work. Since yoga is a wellness practice that requires mental and physical skills such as flexibility, surrender, and introspection, it is reasonable to assume that some of these skills transfer to the professional realm if someone practices with regularity. A sixth and final assumption was that other identities beyond those of being a student affairs educator and a mother influence the way in which women experience mothering, professional work, working within a gendered organization, juggling multiple responsibilities, engaging in yoga practice, and finding ways to maintain a practice. Race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion or spirituality, relationship status, and other identities all play a role in how a student affairs mother navigates her multiple roles in different contexts.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

There are several terms that require specific definitions in relation to this research. *Gender* includes the roles, behaviors, and expectations culture assigns related to how a person should feel and act based on whether their body is seen as male or female (Sensoy
Male and female are the sex markers assigned to people based on a biological binary designated by reproductive indicators like hormones, genitals, and body structure (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The roles, behaviors, and expectations assigned to people are generally rooted in men and males performing masculinity and women and females performing femininity; those people whose sex and gender are in alignment with these expectations are cisgender (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This binary perspective on sex and gender also marginalizes individuals who identify as transgender, non-binary, genderfluid, or genderqueer.

A student affairs mother is generally defined as an individual who has earned a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs or a related field. They have completed at least one year of full-time work and continue to work in a role that falls under the student affairs or student life umbrella at a two-year or four-year public or private institution of higher education in the United States. They identify as a woman and mother to one or more children between the ages of newborn to 17 years old with whom she currently lives. A wellness practice is defined as an intentional activity that leads to a state of holistic health, which encompasses physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions (Global Wellness Institute, n.d.). Finally, yoga practice is generally defined as a mind and body ritual that combines physical postures, breathwork, and meditation that has taken place at least once a week for 10 consecutive weeks either individually or through a community setting.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation contains five chapters. This chapter, Chapter I, introduced the challenges student affairs mothers face when engaging in wellness practices in light of
the culture of institutions of higher education. I defined my research purpose and identified the research questions that guided this study. I shared my positionality and assumptions as a researcher and defined key terms used in this research. Chapter II includes a review of the literature related to feminist theory and gendered organizations, motherhood in the United States, women and mothers in higher education and student affairs, yoga as a wellness practice, and engaged pedagogy in higher education. In Chapter III, I explain the research methodology and methods I used to engage in this research. Chapter IV offers results of this study identified through narrative analysis and provides a collective re-storying among participants. I present these results based on their experiences related to their life stories, what compels them to engage in a yoga practice, how they sustain their yoga practice, the connections they made between their yoga practice and their professional experience, and connections between whiteness and yoga. In Chapter V, I discuss these results in relation to existing literature and offer recommendations for professional practice and future research.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As outlined in Chapter I, this study explored the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. In this chapter, I examine existing literature in five sections. The first section examines the concept of feminist standpoint theory and gendered organizations as they relate to this study. The second section offers a summary of motherhood in the United States from the early 1900s to present day. The third section highlights women’s representation in higher education positions and addresses challenges, successes, and internal struggles that student affairs mothers face. The fourth section reviews yoga as a wellness practice, its history and problems in Western society, and its benefits for women, college professors, college students, and student affairs graduate students. The fifth section reviews three engaged pedagogies in higher education that stem from bell hooks’s engaged pedagogy.

Feminist Theory and Gendered Organizations

Feminist Standpoint Theory

The foundations of feminist theory express that women provide valuable contributions to the world but are unable to reach their full potential due to oppression and that feminist research should create social transformation rather than just critique of social issues (Nicholson & Pasque, 2011). Feminist standpoint theory seeks to uphold these foundations. Much of feminist standpoint theory’s roots are in Dorothy Smith’s (1987) standpoint theory, which emphasized that a person’s position in society dictates
what a person knows. Scholars developed feminist standpoint theory to situate knowledge in a woman’s own experience where emotions, attitudes, interests, and values impact the interpretation of events (Anderson, 2020). According to feminist standpoint theory, women are privileged epistemologically through their membership in an oppressed group, so feminist standpoint theory centers the perspective of women rather than that of men (Smith, 2005).

However, feminist theorists have critiqued feminist standpoint theory because it “fails to take into account diversities of class and race as well as the various forms and modulations of gender” (Smith, 2005, p. 8). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) extended this work to standpoint epistemology, which focused on the epistemological standpoint of Black women and acknowledged that a variety of statuses—for example, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation—intersect to create one’s standpoint. Using critical theory, Collins (2000) developed the matrix of domination, which is the “overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (p. 228). The institutional forms through which the matrix operates shift over time to accommodate new methods of domination (Collins, 2000).

Smith’s (1987) feminist theory also noted the bifurcation of consciousness. Bifurcation of consciousness occurs as women are conditioned to view the world from the perspective of men since men’s perspective is embedded in institutions and social norms; this is similar to W. E. B. Du Bois’s double consciousness that Black Americans experience (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011), which causes tension between being Black and American in a society structured and controlled by whiteness (Bruce, 1992). Smith (2005) described her experience of being a mother and attending to demands of
housekeeping, cooking, childcare, and related tasks and regularly switching into her role as a teacher and sociologist at a university where she focused on preparing for classes, teaching, writing, and attending faculty meetings. She further defined her experience by suggesting that in her university environment, “body, of course, was there as it had to be to get the work done, but the work was not organized by and in relation to it” (Smith, 2005, p. 11). Smith’s example highlights the experience of student affairs mothers who tend to obligations both at home and at work, which is an environment not designed to support the varied responsibilities of mothers. Through her description of this bifurcated consciousness, Smith began to define institutional ethnography, which is “a method of elucidating and examining the relationship between everyday activities and experiences and larger institutional imperatives” that enforce and uphold power (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011, p. 322). One way in which institutional imperatives uphold power is through hegemonic masculinity, which places masculinity in a superior position to femininity and perpetuates men’s dominance over women (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011).

**Theory of Gendered Organizations**

Organizations, including institutions of higher education, are spaces that preserve and reinforce societal norms, cultural practices, and power hierarchies (Chandhok, 2020). According to Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organizations, there are interacting processes that gender organizations, including the division of labor; the designation of appropriate behavior, language, and dress; interactions between and among men and women in the organization that create dominance and submission; and the construction of a perceived gender-neutral organization, which all play a role in maintaining gendered work, spaces, and norms. The ideal worker is a man, and anything that is feminine
counteracts the masculine, hierarchical, and patriarchal organizational structure (Acker, 1990).

Social constructionism and post-structuralism rejected the notion that gender exists in a binary of “women” and “men” or “feminine” and “masculine” roles and focus on “the gendering process in organizations as an outcome of power relations with material effects” (Fotaki, 2020, p. 4). However, Fotaki (2020) pointed out that despite using these critical approaches to studying gender in organizations, scholarship often focuses on how women can adapt into workplaces as they are currently structured, rather than considering the causes of inequality and suggesting options for dismantling patriarchal and hierarchical practices that subvert women. Feminist research addresses organizational power imbalances, but institutions are reluctant to apply it in policy and structural reform because addressing individualized problems through trainings on gender bias or creating mentoring programs are easier to implement than the structural change that women need (Fotaki, 2020).

Institutions of higher education are content with operating from the dominant “ideal” male perspective. White men established most colleges and universities to serve the postsecondary educational needs of other White men (Renn & Reason, 2013). Even as these institutions began to admit women, people of color, and other marginalized populations over time, the structures created to serve White men remained in place (Renn & Reason, 2013), leaving much of the higher education experience lacking for these marginalized groups. Patriarchy and sexism were the overt and covert methods used to control women in higher education (Hoffman, 2011). Both within and outside of higher
education contexts, women who are mothers have faced numerous inequities throughout history.

**An Overview of Motherhood in the United States**

Over time, feminist movements shifted the importance and focus of motherhood in feminist thought (Maroney, 1985), although these movements overwhelmingly benefitted White women. The suffrage movement demanded recognition of the domestic skills of mothers, whereas later feminist movements rejected the patriarchal expectations of obligatory motherhood and embraced new contraceptive opportunities (Maroney, 1985). The historical expectation of mothers assuming responsibility for child raising and development developed due to “the wealth generated by capitalist production and the requirement to shape a schooled and self-regulating labour force out of neonatal plasticity” and persisted from the 1920s to the 1960s (Maroney, 1985, p. 42).

While more White women gained access to the workforce during this time, particularly during World War II as they occupied industries vacated by men, women of color remained present in domestic service jobs and earned lower wages (Conway, 2016; Vogtman, 2017). From the 1920s to the 1970s, Black and Asian married women were more likely to work than White women (Conway, 2016). Domestic service work was one of the only livelihoods available to women of color, and they primarily served White middle-class families by completing demanding household tasks and childcare (Vogtman, 2017). Frequently, this work did not pay enough for these women to even support their own children (Vogtman, 2017).

In the 1960s, the women’s movement challenged “the ideological and structural organization of marriage and family and central institutions organizing gender”
(Maroney, 1985, p. 42) and pushed the notion of free sexual activity for women, denying the importance of motherhood in the process. During the 1970s, childbearing among women dropped as more women attended college and waited longer to marry, and the women’s movement and economic challenges further influenced the decision to delay or not have children (Maroney, 1985). More women entered the workforce, and the number of stay-at-home mothers drastically declined in the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, by the 1980s a more positive perspective of motherhood emerged, insisting on a reclamation of the role (Maroney, 1985).

Since the 1990s, highly educated women with children have increased dramatically (Geiger et al., 2019). In 1994, 65% of women ages 40 to 44 with a Ph.D. or professional degree gave birth, whereas by 2014, 80% of women with a Ph.D. or professional degree gave birth (Geiger et al., 2019). Additionally, mothers spent 9 hours a week on paid work and 10 hours a week on childcare in 1965, compared to 25 hours a week on paid work and 14 hours a week on childcare in 2016 (Geiger et al., 2019). As of 2019, mothers were the primary income generators for their household in 40% of families (Geiger et al., 2019). Even though women comprise nearly half the U.S. workforce and men assist with housework and childcare more than in the past, 77% of adults said women face a lot of pressure to be an involved parent, whereas only 49% of adults said that men face the same amount of pressure (Geiger et al., 2019).

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread rapidly in the United States, forcing some of the workforce into remote settings, which included schools moving to remote learning modalities and childcare facilities shuttering their doors. The COVID-19 pandemic also disproportionately impacted women of color, especially those
who were low-income mothers whose pay was critical to their family’s survival (Frye, 2020). Perelman (2020) wrote about how the COVID-19 economy functioned so that working parents could only handle a child or a job, not both, and that it “declared working parents inessential” (para. 13). In April 2020, one in three working mothers were the main care giver to children compared to one in ten working fathers (Miller, 2020). Working mothers quickly experienced burnout, despair, and increased psychological distress trying to maintain their jobs while directing their children’s virtual learning (Dickson, 2020; Miller, 2020; Perelman, 2020).

As fall approached, families had to make difficult decisions about sending their children back to school with the dangers of the virus still lurking, or risk losing an entire income in the family to keep children at home (Perelman, 2020). According to a 2021 McKinsey and Company report, one in three women considered leaving their jobs due to family and childcare demands during the pandemic (Burns et al., 2021). Many women felt forced out of their jobs and careers as their responsibilities at home drastically increased, going from full-time to part-time to unemployed, potentially never being able to reenter the job force in the future (Dickson, 2020; Perelman, 2020). Organizations were not discussing these challenges with working mothers, largely because “parenting issues are so often considered as tantamount with women’s issues that they’ve been rendered marginalized in the discourse, almost to the degree that they’re ignored altogether” (Dickson, 2020, para. 11). As Acker (1990) wrote,

> Sexuality, procreation, and emotions all intrude upon and disrupt the ideal functioning of the organization, which tries to control such interferences…women’s bodies—female sexuality, their ability to procreate and
their pregnancy, breast-feeding, and child care, menstruation, and mythic ‘emotionality’—are suspect, stigmatized, and used as grounds for control and exclusion. (p. 152)

Contemplating this control and exclusion, feminist theorist Silvia Federici (2009) argued that Marx’s analysis of capitalism even ignored the importance of women’s unpaid reproductive work, further contributing to the exploitation of women’s domestic labor and discounting its contributions in capitalism.

Women and Mothers in Higher Education and Student Affairs

Gendered processes infiltrate institutional productivity and uphold gender segregation, gendered divisions of labor, and gender wage gaps (Chandhok, 2020). Within a student affairs context, Hughes (1989) described higher education as a space “designed to promote and reward ‘masculine’ development by focusing mainly on cognitive learning experiences and rewarding ‘masculine’ principles, such as competition, aggression, ambition, independence, and analytical behaviors” (p. 18).

Nevertheless, women were integral in establishing student affairs as a profession. Women graduated from Teachers College at Columbia University as early as 1913 with a degree to serve as Advisers for Women at colleges and universities (Hughes, 1989). Women also started a national organization for women deans in 1903 and, later, Esther Lloyd-Jones developed the title of Dean of Students to eliminate the gendered nature of the role (Hughes, 1989).

Furthermore, Hughes (1989) asserted that many student affairs values—supporting, nurturing, promoting advocacy, ensuring justice and equity—were feminine values. This perspective holds true today while also creating challenges for women in
student affairs. While students can benefit from work that incorporates these values, they also limit the expectations of what women in student affairs should do or are capable of doing, thus restricting women to certain positions or levels of career advancement.

According to the American Council on Education (ACE) (2017), women remain underrepresented among college presidents and typically follow different paths to the role than men. Nearly one-third of women presidents have adjusted their career progression to care for a dependent, partner, or parent, compared to 16% of men who are presidents (ACE, 2017). At the same time, 89% of college presidents think it is important or very important to complete periodic review of institutional policies to eliminate gender bias (ACE, 2017).

Additionally, across the U.S., about half of higher education administrators were women, but the representation of women fell dramatically in more executive, higher-paying jobs, where women only occupy 30% of the seats (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). Among higher education administration positions, women earned less than men (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). In 2001, women earned 77 cents to every dollar a man made and, in 2016, they earned 80 cents to every dollar a man made (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017). The decrease in government funding for higher education during the economic recession between 2009 and 2011 halted progress in narrowing this gap (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017).

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread in the United States from 2020 through 2021, a Transamerica report found that the COVID-19 pandemic caused 35% of institutions to see higher turnover among their employees (Umpierrez, 2021). In a study conducted with 21 student affairs mothers pre-pandemic, participants wanted to “be both model
employees and model mothers, and did their best to attain those goals within the confines of demanding jobs and performing caretaking work” (McKinnon-Crowley & Black, 2021, para. 3). McKinnon-Crowley and Black (2021) noted that these feelings regarding this “impossible balance” (para. 5) only worsened as women needed to be responsible for managing virtual school schedules and precarious childcare situations while continuing to work remotely and manage second-shift work at home.

**Challenges for Mothers within the Work Environment**

In recent years, much of the literature related to student affairs mothers studied their work-life balance or factors that contributed to their success and professional advancement or intentional lack thereof. Many of these studies highlighted the myriad challenges that student affairs mothers face both personally and professionally, which could cause them to seek out a sustained wellness practice. Challenges within the work environment include unsupportive policies, performance scrutiny, changes to career advancement, and a lack of representation. Internal struggles include finding balance, self-sacrificing behavior, and guilt. Despite these obstacles, mothers in student affairs benefit from different forms of support, tailoring work, and finding other positive aspects of working motherhood, which contribute to personal and professional success.

Student affairs mothers enter workspaces fraught with limiting policies and sexist behavior from colleagues. Supple (2007) interviewed 12 women who were mothers in mid- to upper-level roles in higher education administration and asserted that most participants felt institutional policies were unsupportive and not designed for full-time working mothers. Nobbe and Manning (1997) found that women had to take the initiative to plan their own maternity leaves, planned to minimize inconvenience or reductions in
service during their leave, and faced unclear institutional policies and designed their own leaves to best accommodate their needs.

Vasquez (2012) interviewed mid-level women leaders of color who also had family obligations and found that all participants took on additional responsibilities at work “due to either having additional duties as assigned by nature of their role, staffing gaps, strengths, skills, and/or knowledge that no other staff members possess, or challenges due to budget cuts” (p. 91). Furthermore, women in higher education administration who are mothers reported experiences of harassment and stereotypes (Vasquez, 2012), were overlooked and dismissed at meetings (Lee, 2015), and needed to make political decisions about whether to share personal stories about their children (Lee, 2015; Supple, 2007). These workplace barriers and behaviors limit the success of student affairs mothers, undervalue their professional experience, and ignore their unfolding path to burnout.

**Performance Scrutiny**

In some studies, women reported feeling watched and felt their performance was under greater scrutiny due to concerns about their level of productivity after having children (Nobbe & Manning, 1997; Vasquez, 2012; Wolfe, 2015). Some women felt extra pressure to perform at a higher standard after returning from maternity leave to prove they can meet self-imposed and society-imposed standards of productivity that meet the expectations of patriarchal systems at play in higher education (Wolfe, 2015). Vasquez (2012) interviewed mid-level women of color who shared that when they had to spend time away from work or change work patterns to tend to personal or family needs, such as needing additional rest during pregnancy or taking care of sick family members,
colleagues and supervisors began to question their work (Vasquez, 2012). They also felt as though they were “constantly being observed regarding their decisions, their response, or lack thereof to situations, crisis, or challenges that may present themselves” (Vasquez, 2012, p. 88).

**Changes to Career Advancement**

For many women, this oppressive work environment caused them to reevaluate what was important in their lives, as giving equal effort to motherhood and a career in student affairs was often not easily achievable (Collins, 2009; Nobbe & Manning, 1997; Pertuz, 2017; Supple, 2007; Vasquez, 2012). In Pertuz’s (2017) study of 26 Latinas who were midlevel student affairs administrators, participants’ considerations of starting a family influenced the way some of the participants navigated their careers. They intentionally paused or limited their career advancement due to the possibility of motherhood, while others put motherhood on hold to pursue opportunities in their career (Pertuz, 2017). Many of Pertuz’s (2017) participants felt as though “they needed to choose between family and advancement” (p. 175) and that student affairs did not seem to be a friendly environment for families due to expectations to work late hours and take on extra responsibilities.

Additionally, the perceived requirements for success in higher level positions, such as a vice president role, prompted women to postpone or no longer pursue further education or career advancement (Nobbe & Manning, 1997; Supple, 2007; Vasquez, 2012). Collins (2009) conducted a study with six women who made the decision to forego professional advancement to a vice president position and remained in their mid-level roles. All of the women desired at one point in their careers to be “superwoman” by
balancing a partner, family, and career in student affairs. They dedicated immense time
and energy into their work at the early stages of their careers, but eventually reached a
point where they had to make a choice “between their occupational dreams and their
commitments to their family” (Collins, 2009, p. 98). Other women made different types
of professional compromises, such as staying at an institution longer than planned or
advancing at a slower pace (Supple, 2007).

**Lack of Representation**

Adding to the slowed or terminated career advancement of student affairs mothers
is a scarcity of representation. The lack of student affairs mothers who hold significant
leadership positions at an institution and who serve as mentors and role models further
limits many student affairs mothers’ abilities to see their own possibilities for career
advancement (Collins, 2009; Nobbe & Manning, 1997; Supple, 2007). Unfortunately, all
of these factors perpetuate a continuous cycle of missing representation. So long as
student affairs requires women to deny their relationships (with family and friends) on
behalf of their work and career advancement (Supple, 2007), women will turn down
higher leadership opportunities and thus will limit the availability of mentors and role
models. As women contemplate these professional challenges, they also face internal
struggles due to the many roles they hold.

**Internal Struggles for Mothers**

Student affairs mothers who persist in the field face immense pressure to
constantly juggle multiple demands. Based on society’s gender role beliefs and the higher
education work environment, student affairs mothers are expected to have “a unified
sense of self and the sense of being ‘balanced’” (Lee, 2015, p. 131). This includes
successfully integrating motherhood, leadership, and personal identity (Lee, 2015). Yet, having this sense of unity is almost impossible when both work and motherhood demand full commitment (Lee, 2015). Many women engage in self-sacrificing behavior and feel guilt for what they are unable to accomplish. Although women strive for balance between work and home, women have noted this goal is difficult to achieve (Bailey, 2011; Courtney, 2014).

Finding Balance

In their quantitative study of 188 student affairs professionals in the northeastern United States, Wilson et al. (2015) found women were more satisfied with work-life balance in the earlier and later stages of their career, which suggested that work-life balance may have been more satisfying prior to having children and after children were grown and may have diminished for some women when they were raising children. Other studies show that student affairs mothers struggled with time constraints, often sensing there is not enough time in the day to get everything done (Supple, 2007). They faced work commitments like supporting various levels of staff development and needs and meeting competing deadlines (Vasquez, 2012) and simultaneously juggled mothering commitments such as cooking, making snacks for a child’s entire class, developing a routine for children, and managing their care and activities (Supple, 2007).

Some women felt they could “have it all,” but not all at once (Supple, 2007). Existing research showed that women got closest to a sense of balance when they felt happy with their decisions, did not need to choose between work and family, and could identify their success in both spaces (Vasquez, 2012). They enhanced this sense of balance by “engaging in activities that bring meaning to their lives” (Vasquez, 2012, p.
including, but not limited to, prayer, meditation, reflection, time with family and friends, reading, exercise, shopping, service in the community, and letting things go like having a clean house or making phone calls (Supple, 2007; Vasquez, 2012). Many of these activities were self-care strategies where women could take time to focus on caring for themselves and cultivating interests and passions they had beyond work and mothering.

**Self-Sacrificing Behavior**

In addition to struggles with finding balance, self-sacrificing behavior was common among student affairs mothers and could take many forms (Bailey, 2011; Broghammer, 2016; Fochtman, 2010; Lee, 2015). From the 15 mid-level student affairs mothers who participated in her phenomenological study, Bailey (2011) found that “women had given up hobbies, friends, volunteering, and other things that they used to do for themselves because they no longer had time to do everything” (p. 164). Fochtman (2010) conducted interviews with 15 mid-career student affairs mothers and learned that her participants lacked time for friendships beyond work. In a qualitative study with nine participants, Broghammer (2016) found women expected to self-sacrifice in order to achieve their personal goals as a student affairs professional, doctoral student, and mother. Women in Lee’s (2015) qualitative inquiry expressed the need for self-care, but often placed it last after tending to other tasks at work and home.

Vancour (2009) used a cross-sectional survey to “understand the relationship of academic women’s expectations of motherhood and role balance to their health-promoting behaviors (sleep, physical activity, nutritional intake, stress management, and utilization of health care)” (p. 154). She conducted the study with 69 teaching faculty at
four institutions in the northeastern United States, all of whom had at least one child under age 14 (Vancour, 2009). The results showed that academic mothers neglected engaging in health-promoting behaviors to maintain balance among their many roles, including that of mother and professor (Vancour, 2009). Women who had more intensive motherhood ideologies (i.e., expectations to devote significant time and energy to children while also balancing other roles successfully) had challenges with physical activity, stress management, and sleep, whereas women with better role balance had more success participating in physical activity and stress management (Vancour, 2009). Although Vancour’s study pertained to faculty, it reinforces the notion in other publications that women who are mothers working in student affairs may have a difficult time “having it all.”

**Guilt**

Tied to self-sacrificing behavior, guilt was a common sentiment felt among student affairs mothers (Bailey, 2011; Collins, 2009; Courtney, 2014; Supple, 2007; Terrell & Gifford, 2005; Vasquez, 2012). Women felt they did not put enough time and energy toward their families and felt concerned about their children missing a traditional mother role due to their work in student affairs (Courtney, 2014; Terrell & Gifford, 2005; Vasquez, 2012). Women also felt guilty for failing to engage in self-care, including neglecting doctor appointments, working while sick, taking work home, and missing quality time with partners (Vasquez, 2012). Furthermore, women expressed feeling guilty for not succeeding at home or at work (Collins, 2009). The plethora of tasks, attention to individuals, and mental load that women in student affairs who are mothers take on makes it difficult to see why anyone would want to continue pursing both a career and
motherhood. Yet, specific contributions to personal and professional success make these challenges worth it for some women.

**Contributions to Personal and Professional Success**

Even though existing literature indicates student affairs mothers have to navigate a mountain of responsibilities on their own, the reality is that many women do seek out support to address their day-to-day schedule and tasks (Lee, 2015; Supple, 2007; Wolfe, 2015). Beyond receiving help from particular individuals, other contributions to personal success include finding ways to make the work environment and resources work best for them (Collins, 2009; Nobbe & Manning, 1997; Supple, 2007). Furthermore, many women who are mothers feel as though being a mother makes them a better student affairs educator (Courtney, 2014; Supple, 2007). Because of the ways in which they need to manage their time and energy, women set a positive example for others at work and strengthen their interpersonal skills as a result of mothering (Collins, 2009; Courtney, 2014; Supple, 2007).

**Forms of Support**

The support and community around student affairs mothers are important elements of their success. Within the literature, women shared that their partner or spouse is a critical source of support for them (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). Partners supported working mothers by sharing responsibilities at home and helping make career decisions (Collins, 2009; Lee, 2015). Women also relied on a network outside of partners that extended to other family, friends, childcare, church communities, and individuals who can take care of household cleaning and grocery shopping (Lee, 2015; Supple, 2007; Wolfe, 2015). Supervisors were another key source of support for student affairs mothers,
assisting in making career decisions and allowing flexible work schedules (Collins, 2009; Supple, 2007).

Women found more support in environments that gave flexibility with meetings, assignments, and policy development so that they could also have time to dedicate to family and personal needs (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). Flexible schedules, telecommuting from home, and part-time positions also provided women the flexibility they needed to contribute in their work environments while also meeting needs at home (Collins, 2009). Women delegated and said no to work commitments when necessary (Nobbe & Manning, 1997) and they used technology to work more efficiently and access work while home if needed (Nobbe & Manning, 1997; Supple, 2007). They developed stronger time management and organization skills, more confident decision making, a greater sense of accomplishment, and enhanced productivity (Nobbe & Manning, 1997).

**Positive Aspects of Working Motherhood**

Despite challenges with self-sacrifice and work-life balance, student affairs mothers find many positives in navigating their dual role. Broghammer (2016) noted that student affairs mothers pursuing doctoral degrees felt that chasing further education brought them “pride, confidence, and personal satisfaction” (p. 243) and furthered their aspirations to rise to positions where women like them were not seen very often. Modeling healthy work-life balance was an important example to set for their current colleagues and staff members as well (Collins, 2009; Courtney, 2014; Supple, 2007). Women also took pride in the opportunity they had to influence younger women and their perceptions of work and family, and to make workplaces better for those coming behind them (Nobbe & Manning, 1997).
Motherhood also enhanced women’s professional skills. Women felt “that motherhood teaches people certain skills they cannot have until they experience motherhood” which set them apart from other candidates for future leadership possibilities (Courtney, 2014, p. 123). Additionally, women in Lee’s (2015) study felt that motherhood gave them “an increase in empathy, patience, and the ability to think more critically about their staff’s needs and development,” “helped them become better communicators with their staff,” and “gave them tools to deliver more effective feedback as well as to speak up more in the work place” (p. 131). Supple (2007) also found that women expressed that being a mother made them a better worker; the participants in Supple’s study identified an increase in their productivity, empathy, compassion, and patience, and had a better understanding of student issues.

Because of the balance required to navigate the dual role of mother and professional, many women actually felt less work-related stress once they had children (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). Being a “workaholic” was no longer a desirable quality when student affairs mothers wanted to be present with their family, so establishing better boundaries, reducing stress, and carving out personal time became a priority (Collins, 2009; Supple, 2007; Vasquez, 2012). Furthermore, family motivated student affairs mothers to work hard and set a positive example for their children (Courtney, 2014).

It is clear that student affairs mothers face a variety of challenges both personally and professionally. In their higher education workplaces, unjust workplace policies, performance scrutiny, decisions to modify their career advancement, and a lack of representation of mothers in leadership roles all cause women to question how much workplace pressure is worth experiencing. Beyond these challenges, women contend with
finding balance among their many roles and responsibilities, often engaging in self-sacrificing behavior and experiencing guilt for not being able to do it all. Despite all of this, some student affairs mothers acknowledge the importance of support systems and identifying the positive aspects of being a mother that also make them a better professional.

The literature on women and mothers in higher education and student affairs suggests that student affairs mothers have a difficult time identifying wellness practices that allow them to achieve the ACPA and NASPA professional competency suggestions to establish healthy habits, employ stress-management techniques, build healthy relationships, and engage in thoughtful reflection. Nevertheless, some women are able to incorporate this practice into their lives. Although no literature that demonstrates the effect of yoga practice on student affairs mothers exists, it is evident there are many benefits to yoga practice for an array of yoga practitioners.

**Yoga as a Wellness Practice**

While various forms of self-care exist, yoga is a practice that can incorporate intentional living, reflection, breathwork, meditation, self-awareness, and physical exercise (Chopra & Simon, 2004), all of which tie into aspects of the suggested ACPA and NASPA (2015) competencies related to Personal and Ethical Foundations. The combination of mindfulness practices and physical exercise have the possibility to positively effect an individual’s physical, mental, and emotional well-being. In the United States, yoga has exploded in popularity while also creating concerns related to cultural appropriation, access, and exclusion by primarily catering to thin, White women with socioeconomic mobility (Deshpande, 2017). People with marginalized identities may
have difficulty finding a yoga community in which they feel welcomed and accepted. Despite this, studies have shown that different forms of yoga practice improve health and well-being factors for women, college professors, college students, and even student affairs professionals.

**Yoga History**

Yoga is said to have originated in the Indus Valley civilization in present day Pakistan and northwest India over 5,000 years ago, with roots in the Indian philosophy of Vedic science (Chopra & Simon, 2004). The Vedas are a representation of wisdom and yoga “is a system through which human beings can directly access the wisdom of life” (Chopra & Simon, 2004, p. 11). As a practice, yoga reminds us that there are diverse layers to our lives among which we should seek to find unity (Chopra & Simon, 2004). In his work *Yoga Sutras*, Sage Maharishi Patanjali elaborated upon the eight branches of yoga (*ashtanga*), which “serve as entry points into an expanded sense of self through interpretations, choices, and experiences that remind you of your essential nature” (Chopra & Simon, 2004, p. 32). These branches are *yama* (rules for engaging with others); *niyama* (rules for personal behavior); *asana* (mind-body integration through positions); *pranayama* (life force, energy, or breathing); *pratyahara* (directing senses to look inward); *dharana* (mastery of attention and intention); *dhyana* (witnessing awareness); and *samadhi* (unbounded awareness) (Chopra & Simon, 2004). Through engaging these branches of yoga, one can begin to find harmony within oneself as they navigate the world.

Although yoga originally came to the United States in 1893 via Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk, at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, yoga
was not widely recognized in the United States until the 1920s and 1930s when hatha yoga’s revival in India made its way stateside (Deslippe, 2019). Earlier forms of yoga focused on the mental and mystical, while hatha brought postures and physical exercise that soon became incorporated into workout practices (Deslippe, 2019). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Westerners like Indra Devi and Richard Hittleman returned from studying in India, opened their own yoga studios, and brought yoga to television (Hammond, 2018). By the 1970s, yoga and its spiritual teachings were everywhere, and the 1980s and 1990s introduced yoga to Americans through VHS tapes, DVDs, and local gyms (Deslippe, 2019; Hammond, 2018).

**Yoga and Western Colonization**

As of 2018, yoga in the United States had ballooned into a more than $16 billion industry each year (The Good Body, 2018). There were over 6,000 yoga studios across the U.S. and one in three Americans tried yoga at least once (The Good Body, 2018). With this explosion in popularity also come concerns related to cultural appropriation, access, and exclusion (Deshpande, 2017). Much of the yoga industry is targeted toward thin, White women with more than enough disposable income to spend on the latest yoga clothing, equipment, and accessories (Deshpande, 2017). Sanskrit phrases and statues of Hindu deities are used without understanding and honoring their origins (Deshpande, 2017). People with disabilities, people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and individuals with low incomes often have difficulty finding yoga studios or classes where they feel accepted. Yoga is often taught as one branch, the *asana*, rather than honoring all eight branches of the practice which move it beyond just a physical activity (Deshpande, 2017).
Indians brought yoga to the Western world, but many United States yoga practitioners have more than deviated from its original intentions. Decolonizing yoga practice in the United States is a task certainly worth further exploration. Barkataki (2020) explained that decolonization requires returning land to indigenous people from whom it has been taken, and “in yoga, to indigenize means not only to return the power and control to those from whom the cultural knowledge and practices came, but also to elevate and embrace the cultural elements indigenous to original yoga practice” (p. 130). This entails including indigenous perspectives and respect in practice and considering music choices in asana practice (Barkataki, 2020). Advancing accessibility and equity in yoga is also worthy of consideration in the United States. Barkataki (2020) offered examples of access and equity such as studios offering need-based payment plans, diversifying leadership, supporting locals when hosting a yoga retreat, providing a variety of props for classes, centering practice on the student with the greatest need, and teachers demonstrating several options for a physical posture.

Empirical literature regarding the decolonization of yoga practice in the United States is lacking, but one study highlighted the need for accessible and equitable yoga practice within the Black community. Tenfelde et al. (2018) offered age-stratified focus groups (18-35 years old, 36-64 years old, and 65 and over) at community centers to explore African American women’s attitudes and beliefs about yoga and meditation practices to create better accessibility to such practices within their community. Overall, most participants reported a lack of understanding of how to use yoga and mindfulness practices but were curious to learn more (Tenfelde et al., 2018). However, women in the 18-35 and 36-64 cohorts had more experience with yoga, practiced regularly, and used it
“to support their spiritual needs and reported a connection to an inner divinity” (Tenfelde et al., 2018, p. 233).

Despite some women practicing yoga, the participants discussed barriers to practice, which included the location and cost of yoga classes (Tenfelde et al., 2018). The participants also shared that the outfits and body size of most women who practiced were not reflective of women in the Black community (Tenfelde et al., 2018). As a result of the study, Tenfelde et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of increasing representation of people of color and all body types within yoga settings and suggested offering yoga and meditation in community-based venues or through technology that is accessible to the Black community. Tenfelde et al. only focused on the experience of Black women in one area of the United States, but their work highlighted the immense need to consider how the yoga community can better engage marginalized communities with the practice in culturally relevant ways.

**Benefits of Yoga Practice for Women**

The benefits of yoga have been well documented. Studies show that yoga contributes to decreased stress and mental health concerns and increased health, vitality, and relationships. Shohani et al. (2018) found that “depression, anxiety, and stress decreased significantly in women after 12 sessions of regular hatha yoga practice” (p. 1). Smith et al. (2007) identified yoga’s ability to reduce stress and anxiety and demonstrated that it was more beneficial than progressive muscle relaxation activities at improving mental health outcomes.

Kishida et al. (2018) conducted a foundational study using a qualitative survey completed by 107 yoga practitioners and interviews conducted with a sub-sample of 12
participants. The survey assessed participants’ perceived benefits of yoga and Kishida et al. (2018) indicated that yoga “linked to states of calm, mindfulness, (self-)compassion, and connectedness” (p. 219). This further demonstrated that yoga first led to participants’ experience of intrapersonal changes which in turn influenced their interpersonal relationships (Kishida et al., 2018). Participants commented on how calmness moved with them off the yoga mat to aid them in disagreements with others or in stressful situations (Kishida et al., 2018). Mindfulness provided them with less judgment and more patience in their interactions with others (Kishida et al., 2018). Yoga allowed the participants to also develop self-compassion and body acceptance and was “particularly beneficial to those who identified as being a perfectionist or a ‘workaholic’” (Kishida et al., 2018, p. 219). Self-compassion, in turn, led to feeling more compassion for others (Kishida et al., 2018). Finally, participants discussed feeling a sense of community due to their yoga practice, which developed over time as a result of being with fellow practitioners and teachers in a familiar studio space (Kishida et al., 2018).

As a result of this study, Kishida et al. (2018) developed a conceptual model that depicted “potential pathways in which yoga enhances intra- and interpersonal outcomes, ultimately leading to enhanced health and wellbeing” (p. 219). The model divided yoga into four main skillsets (ethical precepts, physical postures, breath regulation, and meditation techniques) and placed emphasis on the intra- and interpersonal constructs that may be improved through yoga (Kishida et al., 2018). It also designated mindfulness, self-compassion, and social connectedness as three pathways connected to yoga with an indirect pathway to compassion (Kishida et al., 2018). Within the model, “dotted arrows represent pathways which have insufficient evidence based on the qualitative responses,
but can be theorized from the existing literature” (Kishida et al., 2018, p. 219). It also includes factors that could influence the strength of the connections and shows that the pathways are believed to be linked to distal outcomes of enhanced health and wellbeing (Kishida et al., 2018). Appendix A contains a visual depiction of Kishida et al.’s (2018) conceptual model depicting yoga and these variables of interest. This model demonstrates potential utility in identifying how certain professional experiences of student affairs mothers align with their yoga practice.

Building off of Kishida et al.’s theme of community and turning more specifically to the impact of yoga on a helping profession similar to student affairs work, Thompson et al. (2018) offered 36 women counselors and counselors-in-training a four-week yoga and meditation series created to address wellness in the domains of the creative self, coping self, social self, essential self, and physical self. Pre- and post-tests completed by experimental and control groups showed that the experimental group experienced enhanced social wellness as a result of participation in the series, which related to friendship and love relationships (Thompson et al., 2018). The authors suggested that engaging in a space that offered connection and communication could have important implications for counselors in reducing work-related stress and burnout.

Yoga for Mothers

Existing literature identified specific benefits of yoga for pregnant women and new mothers. Pregnant women who participated in prenatal yoga experienced decreased anxiety (Novelia et al., 2018; Sheffield & Woods-Giscombé, 2016) and depression (Sheffield & Woods-Giscombé, 2016). Furthermore, yoga allowed women to strengthen their pelvic floor, improved breathing, assisted with pain relief, and reduced stress and
anxiety during labor (de Campos et al., 2020). Doran and Hornibrook (2013) completed a qualitative study to explore women’s experiences after participating in a group opportunity offered at a community-based women’s health center in Australia that focused on both pregnant women and postpartum women. The group began with gentle yoga, meditation, and breath work; transitioned to morning tea and a check-in; and then focused on birth stories, a discussion, and/or an educational session (Doran & Hornibrook, 2013). Women said the practice helped them develop a connection with their baby and feel prepared for birth (Doran & Hornibrook, 2013). It allowed them to hear and share birth stories with other women, offered a safe feminine space where they regained a sense of self-assurance, gave them opportunities to watch mothering from other mothers, and helped with postpartum depression, anxiety, and isolation (Doran & Hornibrook, 2013).

In a study with postpartum mothers, Russell (2017) held four semi-structured focus group interviews with 17 new mothers who participated in a mother and baby yoga class. The results indicated that the yoga classes provided the women mental and physical therapeutic benefits and social connections to other mothers (Russell, 2017). They described becoming a mother as a transformational process which also included reluctance to leave their babies, increased responsibilities at home, and challenges with accepting changes to their bodies (Russell, 2017). However, the women used the yoga classes as a way to connect with their postpartum bodies and their babies and found the classes assisted with physical recovery and bonding with their children (Russell, 2017). The mothers also found the classes to be a safe space where they shared similar experiences to other mothers and could share advice and support (Russell, 2017).
another study that occurred over four weeks, a one-hour yoga class held once a week was coupled with a 20-minute Dru yoga DVD for participants to complete at home twice a week; this practice significantly reduced stress, negative affect, and dysfunctional coping for first-time mothers (Timlin & Simpson, 2017). Each of these studies show the positive benefits of yoga for pregnant and postpartum women.

If new mothers can find therapeutic benefits and social connections in yoga classes, it is likely that mothers with older children would also benefit from a yoga practice that provides them with a sense of community, a safe space, and support in mitigating the effects of mental health concerns. Beyond the broad literature regarding yoga practice and some studies that focus on mothers, additional research extended into examining yoga or mindfulness activities within the context of higher education. A gap in the literature exists related to the influence of yoga practice on the experiences of student affairs professionals, and more specifically, of those who are mothers. However, several studies conducted in higher education contexts offer insight into potential ways in which yoga may impact the experiences of student affairs mothers.

**Yoga and Mindfulness in Higher Education**

Existing literature related to yoga, mindfulness, and higher education describes research participants including faculty, staff, and students. Ferreira-Vorkapic et al. (2018) conducted a study with 60 college professors divided among yoga nidra, seated meditation, or a control group. The yoga nidra group, which engaged in deep relaxation while lying in a supine position, showed “significant improvement in positive well-being, general health, and vitality” compared to the other groups (Ferreira-Vorkapic et al., 2018, p. 2). Brems (2015) engaged university faculty, staff, and students in a 10-week yoga
program consisting of weekly 90-minute sessions that included grounding, breathing, yoga postures, and meditation. Results showed that even a once-weekly yoga practice had “positive impacts on perceived stress and stress symptom reduction” (Brems, 2015, p. 67). Participants also began to realize that due to their yoga practice, they could better control their emotions, navigate relationships, and slow physical distress (Brems, 2015).

Dolan (2011) conducted a study of stories of transformation due to participation in an undergraduate course using yoga to explore health and spirituality. The 12 adult student participants realized several positive outcomes, including the ability to stay present in the moment, improvement of physical health, identification of communal awareness, better academic concentration, incorporation of ethical principles into thoughts and actions, improvement in relationships, and better multicultural awareness (Dolan, 2011).

Finally, in one of the only studies that connects yoga practice and student affairs work, Burke et al. (2016) examined “how mindfulness-based activities could influence or assist graduate students and professionals enrolled in a student affairs graduate preparation program in maintaining wellness” (p. 96). Twenty-seven individuals participated in a mindfulness program that met six times for about 30 minutes throughout a semester to engage in “mindfulness-based practices such as meditation, progressive relaxation, yoga, mindful walking and focusing exercises followed by reflective discussions and explorations of the core concepts introduced during the session” (Burke et al., 2016, p. 97). Participants noted that the practice increased their awareness of their own body, mental state, and need for relaxation, as well as helped them manage distractions, anxiety, focus, distress, and discomfort (Burke et al., 2016). All participants
found the activities beneficial, and a majority stated they intended to incorporate mindfulness practices into their personal lives and professional experiences (Burke et al., 2016).

These studies shed light on the positive effects of yoga practice among various practitioners based on occupation, gender identity, and experience levels. As Burke et al. (2016) suggested, “Teaching mindfulness practice to student affairs professionals and professionals in training can serve as an avenue to address any job-related stress and burnout” (p. 105). In reviewing the literature related to student affairs mothers, many women confront difficult workplace environments while simultaneously managing professional tasks and personal responsibilities through mothering. Time for self-care is difficult to achieve, but yoga can be an accessible wellness activity whose benefits have the potential to positively influence not only their personal wellness, but also professional experiences.

**Engaged Pedagogy in Higher Education**

Engaging in yoga practice is not only potentially beneficial for student affairs mothers’ mental well-being and relationship development, but it also can impact the way in which these women approach their work with colleagues and students. In outlining a mindful anti-oppression pedagogy for university teaching, Berila (2016) suggested higher education practitioners should consider parting from the notion that academic study and co-curricular involvement are separate and instead encouraged the integration of the two due to their influence on students’ well-being. At the same time, Berila (2016) argued that this integration is not enough and recommended bell hooks’s engaged pedagogy as a means to further encourage well-being that “involves a knowledge of oneself and an
accountability for one’s actions, as well as a deep self-care, for both students and professors” (p. 7).

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) stated, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). hooks’s engaged pedagogy called educators to be committed to a growth process that promotes their own well-being (hooks, 1994). This commitment to personal well-being promotes a holistic learning environment that empowers students and educators to grow together (hooks, 1994). hooks’s (1994) engaged pedagogy influenced modern pedagogical perspectives including Berila’s (2016) mindful anti-oppression pedagogy, Thompson’s (2017) pedagogy of tenderness, and Musial’s (2012) heart-centered pedagogy. These pedagogies challenge the dehumanization that can occur within higher education and incorporate yoga as a method for personal well-being and engaged learning.

**Berila’s Mindful Anti-Oppression Pedagogy**

Anti-oppression pedagogy recognizes educational institutions as places where oppression and resistance occur simultaneously and calls learners to consider multiple perspectives with a focus on marginalized experiences (Berila, 2016). Contemplative pedagogy encourages deep introspection, reflection on internal experience, and a focus on the present moment (Berila, 2016). The union of contemplative pedagogy and anti-oppression pedagogy makes sense as individuals grapple with oppression and take responsibility for their complicity in oppressive systems, which requires deep introspection and an ability to contemplate multiple perspectives (Berila, 2016).
There are several practices that encourage learners to explore their place in anti-oppression work. Recognizing mental chatter and separating the self from these thoughts can allow individuals to unlearn ideologies that uphold oppression (Berila, 2016). Deepening reflection on thoughts and feelings can allow people to develop compassion and unlearn reactions that keep them from engaging in anti-oppression work (Berila, 2016). Creating a pause between an initial reaction and a response can create space for more intentional responses to occur (Berila, 2016). Once individuals better understand their own mental chatter, feelings, and initial reactions, it is easier to understand why others respond to negative comments or actions and to hold compassion for them (Berila, 2016). Yoga can include using these mindfulness practices which then have the potential to show up in the work of student affairs mothers.

**Thompson’s Pedagogy of Tenderness**

Thompson (2017) sought to define a pedagogy of tenderness that allows students and educators to practice “an embodied way of being that allows us to listen deeply to each other, to consider and attentiveness that allow people to do their best work, to go beyond the given, the expected, the status quo” (p. 1). A pedagogy of tenderness creates space for learners to explore emotion, become comfortable with silence, grapple with multiple perspectives, and be vulnerable (Thompson, 2017). It recognizes the presence of bodies in a classroom in the most holistic sense by challenging the notion that our minds are the only element that matters in a classroom (Thompson, 2017). Yoga helps develop connections between the mind and the body by finding alignment amid divergences and is one component of a pedagogy of tenderness (Thompson, 2017). Thompson (2017) described how she used yoga in her own classroom to shift the energy among her
students to ultimately lead to more heartfelt discussion about texts they read for the course. She explained how yoga practice can help students and educators acknowledge the disconnection we feel with our bodies and ignite the energetic body that is often left outside of a classroom or workspace (Thompson, 2017). By engaging this energy, people have the capacity to interact with one another more deeply, tap into their vulnerability, and acquire new knowledge. This pedagogy of tenderness has the potential to translate to the work that student affairs educators complete outside of the classroom.

**Musial’s Heart-Centered Pedagogy**

Musial (2012) described how bell hooks’s engaged pedagogy disrupts dehumanization and disconnection that professors, administrators, and students experience within higher education settings and instead encourages a focus on well-being, openness, healing, feelings, and introspection, which align with yoga principles (Musial, 2012). Musial (2012) questioned what a yogic, heart-centered university pedagogy would look like by using the chakra system to explore the application of anti-racist, feminist, heart-centered pedagogy. The *chakra system* stems from Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and is a series of energetic vortices that block or allow for the flow of breath or life force through the body (Musial, 2012).

*Muladhara*, the root chakra, connects to our desire for stability, security, and safety, which requires heart-centered educators to balance establishing trust with learners while also being provocative by encouraging and demonstrating vulnerability and pushing learners outside of their comfort zones (Musial, 2012). *Svadisthana*, the sacral chakra, embraces the destabilization caused within the root chakra to then act as a witness to learners’ emotions and expressions of pain, grief, or trauma (Musial, 2012). *Manipura,*
the solar plexus chakra, relates to self-esteem, ego, and identity formation, therefore offering the importance of a heart-centered educator minimizing competition within a higher education environment and instead encouraging the best parts of each individual to grow (Musial, 2012). *Anahata*, the heart chakra, is the center of love, compassion, and respect, which educators demonstrate by being fully present with learners, letting go of the idea of changing someone, and inviting challenges, healing, and transformation as part of the learning process (Musial, 2012). *Visuddha*, the throat chakra, focuses on honesty, communication, and self-expression, which heart-centered educators focus on to offer intentional, growth-centered feedback on learners’ work (Musial, 2012). *Anja*, the third eye chakra, is the seat of intuition and invites educators to cultivate time for their own introspection to examine how they can encourage self-guided education and use of analytical tools in their learners (Musial, 2012). Finally, *sahasrara*, the crown chakra, focuses on time for contemplation and connection, which educators can invoke through making time for learners to engage in silence and critical self-awareness in their educational spaces (Musial, 2012).

The pedagogical approaches that Musial, Thompson, and Berila developed have demonstrated that educators can incorporate feminist, anti-oppressive pedagogy into their work by centering the individual experiences of learners, acknowledging emotion, creating space for reflection, and fostering individual growth rather than competition, all of which get lost in the systems of patriarchy and white supremacy in which higher education is deeply entrenched. By engaging in yoga practice, student affairs mothers have the potential to integrate these concepts into their approach to student affairs work,
further decolonizing educational spaces and disrupting patriarchal systems that govern higher education.

**Conclusion**

Student affairs mothers work in higher education contexts that were not originally designed for them; however, the student affairs profession relies on the work of mothers within its professional ranks because of the overrepresentation of women in the field. These women tend to make sacrifices in their careers and their personal lives due to the overwhelming mental and emotional burden they carry between responding to work-related concerns and being the primary person in a household to manage childrearing tasks. Student affairs mothers often place high expectations on themselves to be present for their children while also setting a positive example for coworkers and staff members. These women take on a difficult juggling act not only to support their families, but also to pave the way for other women who aspire to be a student affairs leader and a mother. Many women find that being a mother contributes positively to their professional experience by making them more patient and compassionate with the students, faculty, and staff with whom they work. They also find support in partners and supervisors and adjust their work schedules where possible to best meet their needs as a working mother.

Despite their best efforts, the multiple roles in which student affairs mothers need to be present often lead to challenges with finding balance, engaging in self-sacrificing behavior, and feelings of guilt. Many student affairs mothers admit that taking care of themselves is at the bottom of their to-do list. While recent literature created outlets to highlight the experiences of women who are mothers in student affairs, it placed an overwhelming emphasis on the burdens they face as a professional and a mother. Rarely
does existing literature address who student affairs mothers are beyond these two identities, even if they are integral components of their life. By limiting research to focus on their roles as student affairs practitioners and mothers, the profession continues to ignore the reality that these women cannot continue to pour from an empty cup at work or at home; the profession is missing out on stories of how women maintain their own sense of identity and wellness in addition to taking seriously their roles of mother and student affairs educator.

Few examples exist regarding how women in student affairs who are mothers find time to engage in wellness practices, despite the recommendation from professional associations that all student affairs educators engage in healthy habits, stress-management, building healthy relationships, and engaging in thoughtful reflection (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Yoga is a wellness activity that can aid in developing a truer sense of self, reduce mental health challenges, and improve general health (Brems, 2015; Ferreira-Vorkapic et al., 2018; Shohani et al., 2018). A sustained yoga practice may be able to help student affairs mothers mitigate some of the personal and professional challenges they face and may create more positive work experiences and environments.

As more women who are mothers find ways to engage in wellness practice as student affairs educators, there is opportunity to shift the patriarchal climate that exists in most institutions of higher education to create inclusion of more lifestyles, leadership practices, and healthy relationships with oneself and others.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this feminist narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. The following research questions guided this study. First, what are the life stories of student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice? Second, what compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga as a wellness practice? Third, how do student affairs mothers sustain a yoga practice? And fourth, what connections, if any, do student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences?

This chapter summarizes the methodology and methods chosen for this study. I begin by providing an explanation for why narrative inquiry, a qualitative research methodology, was appropriate for this study. I describe the research participants and the manner in which they were recruited. I then layout my research design that includes participant selection, participant interviews and journaling, and narrative analysis. I review ethical considerations and trustworthiness in qualitative research and narrative inquiry. Finally, I close the chapter with limitations and delimitations of the research.

Research Methodology

Given the research purpose and its related questions, a qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study. Qualitative research invites researchers to understand human action through interpretation instead of measurable objectivity (Kim, 2016). It calls the researcher to “illuminate and understand in depth the richness in the
lives of human beings and the world in which we live” and “to use new understanding for emancipating practices” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 11). Developing an understanding of why student affairs mothers practice yoga, how they maintain their practice, and what connections they make between their practice and their professional work can allow the student affairs profession to recognize the contributions these women make within the workplace. It also has the potential to remove gendered organizational norms in the workplace and focus student affairs work on a heart-centered pedagogy that challenges patriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist practices ingrained in higher education.

Feminist standpoint epistemology calls researchers to “(1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and (2) apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change” (Brooks, 2007, p. 55). This epistemology places women at the center of research using their concrete experiences to build knowledge (Brooks, 2007). Building knowledge in this way can prevent women’s exclusion from primary knowledge generation and can be used to improve women’s conditions in the workplace (Brooks, 2007). According to Brooks (2017), “Women’s experiences not only point to us flaws in larger economic and political systems but also offer potential solutions to these flaws” (p. 60).

Narrative inquiry is one qualitative methodology that aligns with feminist standpoint epistemology. Within qualitative research, narrative inquiry is a particular methodology that develops a depth and richness of each participant’s lived experience. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), narrative inquiry “assumes that people construct their realities through narrating their stories” (p. 157). Narrative inquiry asks participants to share their lived experiences so that the researcher can develop an
understanding of individual stories while simultaneously identifying a more holistic narrative woven through all participant stories (Jones et al., 2014). As a methodology, it was appropriate for this study because it sought to engage participants in a storytelling process that allowed them to discuss their identities as a yoga practitioner, mother, and student affairs educator. Narrative inquiry provides space for participants to determine how far they want to explore and analyze their identities, experience, and professional lives. Finally, using narrative inquiry aligns with ACPA and NASPA’s (2015) Personal and Ethical Foundations competency that calls for professional reflection. Student affairs mothers’ stories of their professional experiences can help us understand complexities within the higher education environment. Next, I describe the participants in this study.

**Research Participants**

This study focused on student affairs educators, generally defined as an individual who has earned a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs or a related field. They must have completed at least one year of full-time work and continue to work in a role that falls under the student affairs or student life umbrella at a two-year or four-year public or private institution of higher education in the United States. Having earned a master’s degree is a common requirement for entry into the student affairs profession at many institutions. Completing a minimum of one year of full-time work allowed participants to be well introduced into the culture of an institution and familiar with their professional workload and expectations. Additionally, student affairs can encompass a variety of functional areas depending upon the structure of a college or university. Participants must have also identified as a woman and mother to one or more children between the ages of newborn to 17 years old with whom she currently lives. I specified
the age range and living arrangement to capture student affairs mothers who likely play a
daily role in caretaking for a child or children in addition to their professional
responsibilities.

I chose this population for several reasons. Women comprise the majority of the
student affairs profession and women who are mothers are a segment of this population.
Women, and particularly those who identify as mothers, continue to face ideal worker
norms that are set up to maintain patriarchal, capitalist, and white supremacist systems
embedded in higher education contexts that limit the success of women in higher
education leadership (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). Student affairs mothers balance
multiple obligations that can include, but are not limited to, engaging in their professional
work, caregiving for a child or children, caregiving for other family members, managing
household tasks, participating in community and professional organizations, and
furthering their education. These responsibilities can often place a mother’s own wellness
last among her priorities. Existing research centers on the challenges that student affairs
mothers face in finding work-life balance, which can allow the field of student affairs to
view these women from a deficit perspective.

By centering the experience of student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a
wellness practice, I intended to share stories of women who make time to focus on their
wellness despite myriad work and family obligations. By creating time for an intentional
wellness practice, student affairs mothers push against the systems that create an
environment in which women feel their needs do not deserve to be met first. However, it
is important to acknowledge that their stories are filtered through their racialized lenses
as White women, which shape their perspectives as student affairs mothers seeking
wellness. Still, understanding the strategies and means through which these women create space to engage in yoga can make wellness practices seem more achievable to other student affairs mothers and potentially other professionals. Additionally, sharing stories of what compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga practice and sharing stories of the connections they make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences has the potential to illustrate opportunities for change and growth within student affairs work. The variety of functional areas within student affairs and levels of leadership in which participants served can add to the breadth of this possible change and growth within the profession.

Furthermore, participants must have had an established personal yoga practice that takes place either at home (independently or with the use of online video instruction) or through a community setting (gym, yoga studio, park district, etc.) at least once a week for at least 10 consecutive weeks. This requirement ensured that participants engaged with yoga as wellness practice to a point where it is well-integrated into their life, and they may have the capacity to identify its influence on themselves and their professional experiences. Participants who are new to yoga practice may be less familiar with how to incorporate asanas (physical postures), pranayama (breathing exercises), and meditation (contemplative practices) into their practice and with their intended purposes.

Research Design

To recruit participants, I used criterion and snowball sampling strategies to solicit participants from three groups centered on women in student affairs with which I was able to share participant solicitations found in Appendix B. There were also two main types of information that I needed to answer the research questions. First, participant
demographic information was necessary to collect so I could understand who the participants were in terms of their social identities and student affairs education and professional history. Gathering this information allowed me to gain some initial insight into what shapes the participants’ stories. I collected this information in the prospective participant demographic form in Appendix C. Since this was a narrative inquiry study, the majority of the information I collected was perceptual, meaning the narrative data will be based on the participants’ descriptions of their perceptions and experiences. I collected this data through two semi-structured interviews with each participant and journal prompts given to each participant, which I explain in further detail below.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

To recruit participants, I used criterion and snowball purposeful sampling strategies. Jones et al. (2014) stated that purposeful sampling is “sampling for information-rich cases” (p. 107). More specifically, criterion sampling is vital to identify information-rich cases to study and assure quality-control of the selected participants. The purpose of criterion sampling is “to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criteria of importance” (Patton, 1990, p. 176). Snowball sampling relies on the use of initial information-rich participants and their identification of additional participants who would meet the sampling criteria (Patton, 1990).

I planned to identify at least eight to twelve participants for this study who met the participant criteria. Kim (2016) suggested that there is a lack of consensus among qualitative theorists regarding the optimal number of participants for qualitative research studies and recommended that in narrative inquiry research, the quality of the interviews is more important than the quantity of them. My goal in obtaining eight to twelve
participants was to reach a point of thematic redundancy among the narratives (Kim, 2016). According to Kim (2016), the “aim is to gather a sufficient depth of information from various types of data as a way of fully describing the phenomenon being studied” (p. 161).

To recruit participants, I engaged three groups centered on women in student affairs—the S.A.M.S. (Student Affairs MomS) Facebook group, the Fit S.A.M.S Facebook group, and the NASPA Womxn in Student Affairs (WISA) Knowledge Community. S.A.M.S. is a private group with over 7,000 members for mothers who work in the student affairs profession. Over time, members of this group have inquired about recommendations for practicing yoga, which made this a viable space in which I could identify participants. Within this group, I learned about the existence of a subgroup on Facebook called Fit S.A.M.S., which was intended for student affairs mothers looking to focus on health and wellness goals. Given the focus of the group, this seemed like a relevant place to cross-post my participant solicitation. I was also able to share my participant solicitation with the NASPA WISA Knowledge Community, which is a community that provides women in student affairs with professional development opportunities through regional and national platforms.

I posted a participant solicitation in the S.A.M.S. Facebook group four times over the course of six weeks. Some members of the S.A.M.S. group tagged other members on the post to draw their attention to the solicitation. I posted the participant solicitation in the Fit S.A.M.S. Facebook group only once since it had low activity and significantly lower membership. The participant solicitation shared in both of these Facebook groups is included in Appendix B. As a recipient of the NASPA WISA Knowledge Community
Womxn’s Research & Scholarship Award, I contacted the leaders of the WISA to ask if I could share my participant solicitation with WISA membership. They graciously included my participant solicitation in their May 2021 monthly update email, which is also included in Appendix B.

Communication shared in each of these spaces included some combination of information about me as the researcher, the purpose of the study, a summary of the research questions, criteria to participate, what participation will entail, incentives for participation, my contact information to which people could submit questions, a link to a secure online prospective participant demographic survey, and encouragement to share the research information with other individuals who may be eligible to participate. In addition to Appendix B showing these different forms of participant solicitation, Appendix C includes the questions on the prospective participant demographic survey.

Ultimately, I received 15 submissions on the prospective participant demographic survey. One submission did not meet the participant criteria and was discarded. The 14 remaining submissions met the participant criteria. Each person who met the participant criteria received an email from me indicating they met the criteria for the study and inviting them to schedule a 30-minute introductory meeting with me via secure video conferencing. The purpose of this introductory meeting was to introduce myself as the researcher and share my interest in the research topic, explain the purpose of the study, review the timeline and time commitment for the study, answer any questions, share and review the informed consent form that was also later sent to the participant via email, and schedule the first interview if they agreed to participate in the study.
Of the 14 prospective participants, two did not respond to the invitation to schedule an introductory meeting with me after three email attempts. Two prospective participants scheduled their introductory meeting but rescheduled their meeting and did not attend. I made two additional attempts via email to reschedule the meeting with both of these individuals, who ultimately did not respond. The remaining 10 prospective participants scheduled and attended their introductory meeting with me, agreed to be recorded in the introductory meeting, agreed to participate in the study, and signed the informed consent form. Thus, they are the 10 White student affairs mothers included in this study. The informed consent form is found in Appendix D. I recorded each introductory meeting and stored the recordings on a secure cloud-based platform and also kept backup recordings on an external hard drive stored in a locked drawer in my home office. I transcribed each meeting and stored these transcriptions in the same manner.

The introductory meetings allowed me to begin to build rapport with each participant and addressed some of the tasks that were necessary to move forward with the research. A researcher must engage with a participant and establish a relationship of mutual trust and understanding so that the participant feels comfortable sharing their narrative. This relational view is critical for effective narrative data collection. As the researcher, I aimed to establish a relationship that promoted growth and learning for both me and each participant by being vulnerable about my own experience as a student affairs mother and how I make connections between my yoga practice and professional work (Kim, 2016).

**Participant Interviews and Journaling**
The primary method of data collection in narrative inquiry is interviews. Thus, data collection occurred with each participant through two semi-structured interviews conducted over secure video conferencing with four weeks of online reflective journal prompt completion between them. Kim (2016) suggested that narrative inquiry research questions “have a ‘how’ or a ‘what kinds of’ that prompts exploration or discovery rather than a simple answer” (pp. 96-97). I used this format to design my interview questions and journal prompts that are found in Appendices E, F, and G. Throughout all interviews and my journal prompt review, I maintained a self-reflexive journal to document my research process, my thoughts and responses as a researcher, observations of the participants, and themes I began to identify in the participant narratives.

The first semi-structured interview was a life story interview (Kim, 2016) focused on the participant’s background and identities, their prior and current work in student affairs, how they engage in a yoga practice, what made them pursue a yoga practice, and how they sustain their yoga practice. Each interview lasted one to two hours in length and took place via secure video conferencing. I designed this first interview to focus on the first three research questions and to allow the participant to settle into storytelling before drawing connections between their yoga practice and professional work. Appendix E contains these interview questions. I recorded each interview and stored the recordings on a secure cloud-based platform and also kept backup recordings on an external hard drive stored in a locked drawer in my home office. I transcribed each interview and stored these transcriptions in the same manner. Before the first interview concluded, I asked the participant to schedule their second interview with me and I reminded them to complete the journal prompts that were sent to them via email over the next four weeks. Upon
completion of the first interview, participants received a $25 cash incentive paid to them through a secure electronic payment method.

Upon completion of the first interview, I sent the participants a set of journal prompts to be completed once a week after they completed their yoga practice for four weeks; the same prompts were provided each week. Each week I emailed a link to the prompts directly to each participant. The participants could answer the prompts via a secure online form. The purpose of the journal prompts was to encourage the participants to pay attention to what they bring to and leave with after their yoga practice in terms of thoughts and emotions. By completing these prompts, the participants were preparing to answer questions that were posed to them in their second interview. The journal prompts also served as another data collection method that supplemented the interviews and provided participants the opportunity to share stories that they may not recall as easily in an interview. Appendix F contains the journal prompts.

I stored the journal prompt responses on a secure cloud-based platform and also kept backup responses on an external hard drive stored in a locked drawer in my home office. Upon completion of the journal prompts, participants had the opportunity to select and receive a yoga-related book of their choice valued at no more than $25. I invited participants to select a yoga-related book to encourage a deeper connection to their yoga practice, and I offered them a curated list of recommendations that contained the work of several Black and South Asian yoga practitioners and scholars, among others. I purchased the book each participant selected via online stores and had them directly mailed to each participant.
After completing the four weeks of journal prompts, participants completed a second semi-structured interview with me. The second semi-structured interview served as the conversation phase of the narrative inquiry process (Kim, 2016). This interview focused on in-depth questioning and expansion of the content presented in the journal prompt responses from each participant and centered on the connections the participants made between their yoga practice and their professional experiences. After the first interviews with the participants, I noticed some trends in their responses and also asked questions related to these trends. Each second interview was about one to one and a half hours in length and took place via secure video conferencing. I designed this second interview to focus on the final research question and to allow the participant to narrate experiences in which they made connections between their yoga practice and professional work. Appendix G contains these interview questions. I recorded each interview and stored the recordings on a secure cloud-based platform and also kept backup recordings on an external hard drive stored in a locked drawer in my home office. I transcribed each interview and stored these transcriptions in the same manner. Before the second interview concluded, I reminded each participant that I would contact them again via email to review their participant vignette after narrative analysis was complete. Upon completion of the second interview, participants received a $25 cash incentive paid to them through a secure electronic payment method.

**Narrative Analysis**

Once data collection was complete, I reviewed all interview transcripts and journal prompt responses through an analysis of narratives, also known as a paradigmatic mode of analysis (Kim, 2016). Through this type of analysis, I reviewed the narrative
data to identify common themes or prominent concepts found in the participants’ narratives and journal prompt responses; I then organized these themes under several categories, using the participant stories as data (Kim, 2016). These categories stemmed from the foci identified by the research questions—life stories, reasons for engaging in a yoga practice, strategies to sustain a yoga practice, and links between their yoga practice and professional experiences. Additionally, given that all of the selected participants identified as White women, a fifth category regarding whiteness and yoga emerged in the data. I shared a portion of the participant vignette with each participant to ensure it accurately portrayed their experience. This was shared with them via email, and I invited them to make edits or corrections as necessary and send it back to me so it accurately represented their story as a participant. Eight of the ten participants responded to this email and shared they did not have any edits; two participants did not respond to this opportunity for review.

Narrative inquiry invited me as the researcher to work in collaboration with the participants to co-create a story. Participants shared a narrative that recounted events and I, as the researcher, organized these into a collective story based on the research questions (Kim, 2016). As Kim (2016) wrote, “A story has a connotation of a ‘full’ description of lived experience, whereas a narrative has a connotation of a ‘partial’ description of lived experience” (p. 8). Therefore, this re-storying process is intertwined with power, and allowing participants to review a portion of their stories before I finalized them allowed them to maintain power in the research process (Kim, 2016). This leads me to address the ways in which I ensured I engaged ethically with the participants.

**Ethical Considerations**
In any qualitative research study, a researcher must have certain ethical considerations. Prior to beginning this research, I obtained approval to conduct this study through the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Institutional Review Board. After I selected participants, I asked them for permission and consent to participate in the study through their completion of the informed consent form. They also had the option to leave the study at any time. To protect participant anonymity, participants had the opportunity to select a pseudonym for themselves. The names of any other individuals shared by the participants in the study (such as partners, children, supervisors, or yoga instructors) were left out of the results to maintain their privacy. I saved all interviews and journal prompt responses on a secure cloud-based platform and also kept backup materials on an external hard drive stored in a locked drawer in my home office.

In addition to these steps to ensure ethical research, there are specific ethics pertinent to narrative inquiry, which Kim (2016) called “narrative ethics in practice.” To start, an ethical relationship between the researcher and each participant is paramount. As the researcher, I had to be transparent about my research interests and the research purpose to establish trust with the participants (Kim, 2016). In the participant solicitation, the introductory meeting, and the informed consent form, I clearly stated the research purpose. In the introductory meetings, I shared my interest in the research topic and also asked each participant if they have any questions regarding the purpose of the study, the research timeline, or expectations regarding their commitment. Additionally, the dignity and welfare of participants was important to uphold. I aimed to create a sacred space where participants felt comfortable sharing their narratives by demonstrating active and attentive listening. In utilizing semi-structured interviews, I had the opportunity to
genuinely listen to what my participants shared and followed up with questions that allowed them to make more meaning of their experiences.

Reflexivity is an important tool in upholding research ethics in narrative inquiry. As Kim (2016) described, reflexivity involves first reflecting on the “objective observation” of the research participant and then reflecting on “the reflection of the observation” (p. 105). Reflexivity required me as the researcher to recognize my limitations as a researcher and with my knowledge. It called me to constantly question the ethics at play within my interactions with participants and my status as both an insider and outsider with them. As a student affairs mother who practices yoga, there was potential for me to identify shared personal and professional experiences with the participants. However, I was careful to not make assumptions about a participant’s experience or project my own experience onto their narrative. Engaging reflexivity allowed me to navigate this insider versus outsider status, which I achieved through the use of my researcher journal. It also helped me maintain fidelity to the told stories of the participants. This fidelity was also important in demonstrating trustworthiness within this study.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness and credibility are hallmarks of a well-designed qualitative research study. Perhaps the most important action to take to ensure trustworthiness in narrative inquiry research is engaging participants in the re-storying process. According to Kim (2016), “Narrative is a form of knowledge that catches the two sides of narrative, telling as well as knowing” (p. 6). Therefore, it is imperative that the “tellers”—the participants—are also involved in the knowing, which becomes available through the re-
storying process I complete as a researcher. Clandinin (2013) explained that narrative inquirers move from “field texts” (transcripts) to “interim research texts” (story drafts) to “final research texts” (stories included in the dissertation; p. 200). Involving participants in reading their participant vignette honors the participants’ authority in the research (Clandinin, 2013). Additionally, a review of my researcher journal assisted in data triangulation by incorporating my thoughts and reactions to assist in the data analysis and re-storying processes developed through an analysis of the interview transcripts and journal prompt responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I also maintained an audit trail that included data sources, data collection methods, and analysis processes to demonstrate that the study was conducted in an intentional, systematic manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

In designing this study, there were certain known limitations and determined delimitations. A limitation of this study was that I knew I would hold all participant interviews through video conferencing due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that was occurring during the course of this study. Being able to interview participants in person, especially if interviews took place on their campuses or in their communities, would have added another layer of observation to this work that is missing in my data. Non-verbal cues may also have been lost, which could have added to the richness of data. Additionally, there was potential for technology to malfunction, which did interfere with the progression of interviews. Some participants needed to stop to reset their internet connection or turn off their video to improve the quality of the connection. A second limitation of this study was recruiting student affairs mothers who have an established
yoga practice rather than another wellness practice. By specifically encouraging women to draw connections between their yoga practice and their professional experiences, the themes that emerged from their stories may not be generalizable to all wellness practices in which student affairs professionals engage.

There were also several delimitations in this study. First, the study focused on student affairs mothers, not other parents. This does not mean that men, non-binary, or genderqueer individuals do not need to engage in wellness practices like yoga or that their engagement in wellness practices does not have a connection to their professional work. Given the existing literature that focused on student affairs mothers’ struggles to find work-life balance, I chose to focus on student affairs mothers utilizing yoga as a wellness practice. Second, this study limited the age range and living status of the children for which these mothers care. This was done to center the experiences of mothers who may be more involved in child raising than those mothers whose children are more autonomous or living outside of the home independently.

**Conclusion**

This chapter summarized the methodology and methods chosen for this study. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology that aligns with feminist standpoint epistemology because it asks participants to share their lived experiences so that the researcher can develop an understanding of their individual stories while also identifying themes among them. This study focused on White student affairs educators who are mothers and I recruited participants through two social media groups created for this population and one community for women in student affairs. Once I identified participants, I held an introductory meeting with them followed by two semi-structured
interviews conducted over video conferencing with four weeks of online reflective journal prompt completion between the interviews. After I completed this data collection, I engaged in narrative analysis to identify common themes or prominent concepts stemming from the research questions. I invited the participants to participate in the re-storying process to accurately portray their experiences as a key element of establishing trustworthiness, and I ensured participant confidentiality and anonymity.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the life stories of student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice?
2. What compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga as a wellness practice?
3. How do student affairs mothers sustain a yoga practice?
4. What connections, if any, do student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences?

These research questions also provide the framework for how results are presented in this chapter.

I recruited participants through two social media groups created for this population and one community for women in student affairs. Once I identified participants, I held an introductory meeting with them followed by two semi-structured interviews conducted over video conferencing with four weeks of online reflective journal prompt completion between the interviews. After I completed this data collection, I engaged in narrative analysis to identify common themes or prominent concepts stemming from the research questions. I invited the participants to participate in the re-storying process by reading a portion of their participant vignette and providing
feedback to me if necessary. Each participant selected their own pseudonym and confirmed that their pronouns are she, her, and hers.

The first section of this chapter offers vignettes of each of the participants in this study. Ten White women who identified as student affairs educators and mothers participated in this research study. The women ranged in age from their early thirties to late forties. Eight identified as mid-level professionals, one identified as a senior-level professional, and one identified as a senior student affairs officer/vice president for student affairs. All of the women had between one and four children under their care at home, ranging in age from infants to 19-years-old. One participant identified as a stepmother who did not have biological children, while the remaining nine parented their biological children. All of the women engaged in a yoga practice spanning lengths of time of just a few months to over 20 years.

A relevant influence on most of the participants’ stories was the COVID-19 pandemic that began in the United States in mid-March of 2020 and caused many of the participants to transition to work from home for a period of time, with some of the women also caring for children or supporting virtual learning as well. At the time of this study, some participants continued to work from home, while others had transitioned back to working on campus on a part-time or full-time basis. The participant vignettes offer insight into each participant’s disclosed identities, educational background, entry into the student affairs profession, current professional role and responsibilities, and other unique details about their experience as a student affairs mother. The vignettes also explain how each student affairs mother was introduced to yoga as a wellness practice.
and what their current yoga practice looks like. Therefore, this section provides a re-storied narrative for each participant.

The rest of the sections in this chapter focus on themes I identified through the paradigmatic mode of analysis and offer a sense of a collective re-storying among participants based on their similar experiences. The second section aligns with the research question: What are the life stories of student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice? I offer themes uncovered in the participants’ stories related to how they came to understand their identities as women in student affairs, their journeys into motherhood, and how they came to understand their identities as mothers in student affairs.

In the third section, I review what compels the women to engage in yoga as a wellness practice, which aligns with the research question: What compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga as a wellness practice? Themes in this section relate to physical benefits, mental engagement, stress management, and personal check-ins. In the fourth section, I identify the themes related to how these women sustain their yoga practice, which occurs through partner support and children’s understanding, practicing at work, and having a specific personal mindset. This section provides responses to the research question: How do student affairs mothers sustain a yoga practice?

The fifth section offers various themes related to the participants’ connections made between their yoga practice and their professional experience, which involve a changed or challenged mindset, enhanced student support, stress management using breathwork, leadership practices, and direct application of yoga in their work. This
section addresses the final research question: What connections, if any, do student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences?

The sixth section touches upon the participant’s reflections on how their identities as White women relate to their yoga practice, and for some, how this also connects to their work as student affairs mothers. Given the dominance of whiteness in higher education and Western yoga practices and communities, this was a relevant theme that became inherently woven throughout all of the research questions and participant narratives, even though it was not always named by the participants. I conclude this chapter with a summary of the results.

**Participant Vignettes**

Ten White student affairs mothers each shared an overview of their backgrounds, which generally included personal and professional information related to their families, education, and prior and current work in student affairs. As required for this study, all participants were also engaged with a regular yoga practice. The ways in which the women practice yoga vary based on their needs, time, and interests in certain types of yoga. Several participants also commented on when they began to pay attention to their own wellness as a student affairs mother. For most, there was a specific shift or intentional choice related to their new focus on wellness, whether it was related to a change in role or routine, a mental health diagnosis, or learning how to schedule their time effectively as a mother. Throughout the data collection process, the participants had several opportunities to name other identities that are salient to them beyond their identities as student affairs mothers. Most participants did not specifically disclose or elaborate on other social identities, but the participant vignettes do acknowledge these
other identities for those participants who did share them. Appendix H provides an overview of all the participants.

Betty

Betty identifies as a 37-year-old, Pagan, White woman who is a survivor of gender-based violence. She is married to her husband and has two children under 5 years old. Betty completed a Ph.D. in human sexuality and two master’s degrees in American studies and education. She works at a mid-sized, private, four-year university in the Northeast in a mid-level professional role focused on gender-based violence prevention, education, and response.

Betty grew up outside a major city in the Northeast in a Catholic family. She attended Catholic school and was an athlete most of her life. She ultimately chose her undergraduate institution so she could be a student-athlete, but she only engaged in her sport during her first year. Betty said she took a lot of religion courses her first few years of college, which ultimately moved her away from the Catholic faith and she later came to identify as Pagan. She shared that Paganism aligns well with her yoga practice and that some of her extended family members have made negative comments to her about both of these aspects of her identity. Betty also described taking a women and gender studies course her sophomore year that led her to change her major and focus on women’s sexuality studies in her future degrees as well. As she pursued her graduate degrees, she held a graduate assistant position in athletics and an assistant director position with a women’s center before arriving in her current professional role housed under the dean of students area.
Betty is an office of one focused on gender-based violence on-call response and survivor support and education. Within her role, she supervises faculty and staff volunteer on-call advocates, meets regularly with the institution’s Title IX Coordinator, advises a group of peer educators, plans educational events and workshops, and runs a campus-based yoga class for survivors of gender-based violence. Betty indicated that raising her children has really begun to impact how she educates them and her students about gender and sexuality.

Betty was initially introduced to yoga during her first year of college but felt that it was not a good fit for her at the time. When she graduated, she began working out with a trainer but was struggling with that transition after years of being a competitive athlete on teams. One morning, she attended a gentle yoga class at her gym, and she said, “It was like the first time that I felt connected with my body like since I quit playing [my sport].” She realized she wanted to continue to practice and focused on “the breathing and connecting and stretching and less about, right, like the exercise or fitness.” She later began integrating vinyasa yoga into her practice. Currently, Betty gets up early to work out every morning and explained that if she does not do that, it feels like her whole day “is thrown off.” She practices vinyasa yoga once a week, typically on Friday mornings at home as a way “to reconnect and kind of wind down at the end of the week.”

In addition, three years ago Betty worked with an intern to begin a trauma-informed yoga program on her campus that is a yoga nidra practice. Initially the class was offered every other week, but during the most recent year it was offered every week alternating between an evening and a lunch hour each week. Betty attends these classes as they are offered throughout the academic year. She explained that this class is
scheduled every semester around times she can be there because it is important to her. Betty practiced prenatal yoga when she was pregnant with each of her children and practiced postpartum as a way to reconnect with her changed body. Betty also shared that when she knows she will be at work late beyond normal working hours, around lunchtime she will shut the blinds and the door in her office and do a 20-to-30-minute meditation on her yoga mat to give herself some rest during the long day.

Betty described yoga as,
more of like, a lifestyle, or almost like a spirituality…like a way of like, speaking about the world and thinking about, like being…it easily translates off the mat.
…Yoga practice feels more holistic to me.

Her doctorate program in human sexuality helped her focus on wellness being a maintained practice and she explained, “I’m at a point in my career where, like, I am okay with setting boundaries and saying no and taking care of myself.” Betty focuses on her wellness through her scheduling and blocking time in her workday to complete certain tasks like reading in the morning and wrapping up work at the end of the day, as well as blocking time between meetings for breaks.

**Charlotte**

Charlotte is a 44-year-old White woman. She has been with her husband for 14 years and they have four children between the ages of 5 and 12. Charlotte completed a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs. She works at a mid-sized, private, four-year university in the Northeast in a mid-level professional role focused on student access, support, and retention.
Charlotte grew up in a small city in the Northeast and attended a private university close to home for her undergraduate degree where she studied history and theatre and was involved in theatre productions. After graduating, Charlotte moved four hours from home to another city to work in professional theatre for a year, but she did not enjoy her experience and struggled with the ecological impact of the theatre world. She reached out to the vice president for student affairs at her alma mater as she considered a career pivot, and the vice president connected her to the director of what became the higher education and student affairs master’s program in which Charlotte enrolled in the city where she was located. While completing her master’s degree, she held a graduate assistantship and then a full-time professional role in student involvement. She subsequently worked at another institution in student involvement and leadership before arriving at her current institution, where she has been for nearly 15 years.

Charlotte previously worked in student involvement and new student orientation in two different positions before transitioning into her current role in the last year. In this position, student involvement and leadership, programming, new student orientation, and cultural centers are within her purview, so she supervises two direct reports and four indirect reports. Her institution is located where she grew up and is thus closer to family, which was important as she and her husband expanded their own family and wanted familial involvement with their children.

Charlotte explained that after her second child was born, she began to pay more attention to her wellness as a mother. She described how she “just kind of suffered through” having her first child and was used to her anxiety that she said was always a part of her Type A personality. However, when she had her second child she said, “I
realized something’s not right, like…something’s going on here.” She started on some medication but continued to experience anxiety and panic attacks after having her fourth child and eventually connected with a therapist who she has been seeing for about three years. Charlotte said therapy has helped her understand that she felt a driving need to be perfect in her work, which was reinforced by her supervisor at the time.

Charlotte’s therapist recommended she try yoga and she was initially resistant because she did not think she could “quiet her mind for that long.” She shared, “The thought of going into a studio as a plus size woman was not something I had wanted to do,” but her therapist suggested she start with a popular, free yoga channel on an online video platform. Charlotte also subscribes to another well-known online platform that offers different yoga classes, articles, and challenge for members. Each day she pays attention to what her body needs and will choose an instructional video based on that. Charlotte has been practicing yoga daily at home for about two years. She has a nook in her bedroom that she has dedicated for her yoga practice in the evenings. She usually gets her children ready for dinner with her husband and then will practice for about 30 to 45 minutes while they eat dinner. She prefers practicing alone and said she has felt self-conscious when practicing in a group.

**Clara**

Clara is a 37-year-old White woman who is married to her husband, and they have two children, ages 2 and 6. Clara completed a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs and a certificate in mental health counseling. She works at a mid-sized, public, four-year university in the Northeast in a mid-level professional role focused on wellness promotion. Clara has worked at her institution for almost 15 years
and has been in her role for almost 10 years, which included a promotion to her current title.

Clara grew up in a small city in the Northeast and moved to her current location to attend college. She had not necessarily intended to stay in the area but has been there for 20 years. Clara did not know a lot of people who had gone to college when she was growing up and the only class she did well in during high school was Spanish, so she studied Spanish as an undergraduate student. She decided to pursue a master’s degree in school counseling but realized that was not her path early on in her program and she switched to a degree in higher education and student affairs. After graduation, Clara worked as an academic counselor for five years before she decided to complete her mental health certificate and then she began working in wellness promotion.

In her current role, Clara is an office of one; she offers wellness programming across campus, partners with counseling services for mental health programming, and serves on committees for faculty. Since her role is in wellness, Clara said wellness is a big part of her identity and she likes to ensure she is modeling that for others. Clara began to pay attention to her wellness when she first transitioned into an academic support services role and began to talk about wellness more with her students. When she moved into her current role specifically focused on wellness, she said she was in a good place, eating and sleeping well and exercising. She said this role “allowed me more time to look at what all my options were and to be a little bit more critical of what I was doing.”

Clara lives in a rural community and a big part of her life is her commute. She drives an hour to work in the mornings and an hour and a half back home in the evenings.
This can be a challenge for her as a mother because sometimes she has to stay at work late to do evening programs, so she is not home to put her kids to bed.

Clara has been practicing yoga for about 20 years. When she was a first-year student in college, her first-year seminar instructor received funding to start a yoga class and needed students to attend, so the instructor offered extra credit for students to go to the yoga class. Clara attended with a few friends and enjoyed it so much she continued attending the class throughout her four years of college. She also began to practice meditation during this time, but that stopped for her after college. During graduate school she practiced yoga on her own using videos and then when she began professional work, she started attending classes at a yoga studio. When she was pregnant with her first child, her doctor encouraged her to increase her yoga practice, so she again practiced using online videos and started to attend prenatal yoga classes. She continued with in-person classes and online videos and when she was pregnant with her second child.

After her second child was born, a new yoga studio opened in her area, and she began to practice aerial yoga. Clara said she really enjoyed aerial yoga because it pushed her to find more strength physically and mentally, especially after experiencing a car accident that curbed her ability to exercise in certain ways. Then, for a little over a year since the COVID-19 pandemic began, Clara has primarily practiced at home and work at least two times per week for 45 minutes using online videos through a popular, free yoga channel on an online video platform. She started to use meditation again for about 15 to 20 minutes each day. Each morning when she arrives at work, she uses a meditation app on her phone to center herself, and she uses that app or another at night before bed as well.
Delaney

Delaney identifies as a 48-year-old White woman who is married to her husband, and they have three children between the ages of 13 and 19. She was raised Presbyterian and continues to identify as such but focuses more on her spirituality in relation to community and service. Delaney completed a Ph.D. in higher education leadership and a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs. She recently began working at a mid-sized, public, four-year university in the Midwest in a senior student affairs role with oversight of multiple student affairs functional areas.

Delaney grew up in a middle-class family in the Midwest with one older brother. She attended a large, public institution where she completed her undergraduate degree in psychology and was involved in residence life. She met her husband in college and they got married before the second year of her master’s program, which she completed in another Midwest state. They remained in that area for nearly 20 years and in that time, Delaney worked in mid-level professional roles in residence life, student involvement and wellness, and academic registration, and she held a graduate assistantship as she completed her Ph.D. She then conducted a national job search and ultimately relocated her family to a different state in the Midwest, where she worked in senior student affairs roles at three different institutions before arriving at her current university. Delaney began her current role during the COVID-19 pandemic, so campus activity has been lower than usual. She wished she had more opportunity to build relationships with staff and students in person and said it has been difficult understanding the campus culture. She has 13 direct reports and expressed curiosity over whether that structure would be sustainable.
Delaney has been practicing yoga for about 12 years. She was introduced to yoga at a gym she attended that had a dedicated yoga room. When she went to her first class, she got there early because she wanted to be in the back corner of the room. She said yoga really quickly caught on for her and “not only did it feel physically good, I remember…my brain, like, you know, my brain was clear.” When her family relocated to another state, she then took classes at one of the local yoga studios. When she accepted her current job, she did not want to disrupt her children’s lives again given their ages and years in school, so her family is located about two hours from her. She stays in a rental home during the week and then commutes home on the weekends to be with her husband and children.

Delaney shared that where she lives during the week near work there is not a yoga community or studio, so she is more engaged with the studios in the town where her family is located. However, she believed she might find it challenging to make time to attend classes there because she does not want to be in town to be with her family and miss even more time with them. Delaney said yoga has become a habit for her, and she leaves her yoga mat out at home, so it is always accessible. For the majority of the last year, she has practiced daily at home using a popular, free yoga channel on an online video platform. Delaney typically practices in the morning, but at the time she had been enjoying practicing at night “as a way to wind down before bed.” Her practice has also shifted over time as she has managed aging and injuries. Delaney engages with meditation periodically, often using a phone app as soon as she wakes up in the morning to complete a brief meditation. Delaney enjoys being in community with other people practicing yoga and has really missed it since the COVID-19 pandemic began. She was
able to attend outdoor yoga in a park during the prior summer and also attended a few yoga classes in the student recreation center on her campus during the past spring. 

**Julia**

Julia is a 42-year-old White woman and immigrant to the United States who is married to her husband, and they have two children, ages 6 and 8. Julia completed a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs. She works at a large, public, four-year university in the Northeast in a mid-level professional role focused on academic advising. Julia has been at her current institution for three years and transitioned to her full-time role from a part-time position.

Julia grew up in another country and recently became a United States citizen. After college, she worked in the hospitality industry in her hometown but began to question if that industry would be best for her long-term as she thought about possibly having a family in the future. While working in hospitality, Julia got a part-time job at a community college that turned into a full-time role, and she ultimately left hospitality and spent four years at the college working in community resources, career services, and programming. Her husband was eventually relocated to the Northeastern United States for his job and Julia took a job in student affairs at a university where she also completed her master’s degree. Julia then spent three-and-a-half years as a stay-at-home mom with her two young children before returning to work at the same institution. After returning, she had a renewed enthusiasm to get back to working with students but felt a shift in how she approached her work. Julia ultimately felt the expectations of that job were too inflexible for her needs as a parent and she found her current opportunity at a different university in the area.
In her current role, Julia engages in academic advising, academic program coordination, advocacy for student access to university services, training new staff, and working closely with student employees. She is considered a part of the leadership team for her area but does not have supervisory responsibilities. She shared her team is changing and growing and she was in the process of determining what her new title and additional job responsibilities might be.

Julia has been practicing yoga regularly for over a year, and on and off for 15 years. When Julia returned to work after being home with her children for three-and-a-half years, she did not engage in many self-care practices for the first six months. Then she began introducing a few activities, one of which was a weekly meditation session through work which she attended with a colleague. She would also occasionally practice chair yoga or Tai Chi over lunch. Over time, she began therapy and joined a gym that she would go to when she could fit it in her schedule.

However, Julia said that when the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, “I think, like many people, I just kind of…allowed myself to get a little bogged down in it…probably eating a little bit too much, maybe drinking a little bit too much.” By the summer, she recognized she felt lethargic and unmotivated and began making small changes to her routine again. She started with a walk every day, and then began practicing yoga every once in a while, which was typically a restorative practice that sometimes just involved breathwork. Julia explained,

I just started really basic, and I had done yoga in the past, so it wasn’t new to me. But I think previously, I had done it more for exercise. But this time I did kind of approach it as like, I’m just going to try some things that make me feel good
mentally and physically and see how it goes. And honestly, I just started doing online videos.

Julia said she started slow and practiced when she wanted to, and by the fall she found that she wanted to practice every day. After dinner, she goes upstairs for an hour and will typically practice for 20 to 40 minutes using different online videos. She said she typically likes practices that are more movement and flow-based, but sometimes she needs a practice that is more restorative or just breathwork. Julia said, “It’s at a point now, I would say, where if I don’t do it, I’m not very happy. I get a little bit cranky. I kind of need it at this point.”

Maeve

Maeve identifies as a 35-year-old, bisexual, White woman who has been with her husband for 12 years and married to him for seven. They have two children under 2 years old. Maeve completed a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs. She works in a professional school at a large, public, four-year university in the Midwest in a mid-level role focused on student support and wellness.

Maeve grew up in the Midwest in the suburbs of a large city and she went to a large, public institution which provided her with her first experiences with people outside of her “White, suburban, middle-class experience.” While in undergrad, she became involved with new student orientation in various roles and realized by her senior year that she wanted to work in student affairs. After graduation, Maeve pursued her master’s degree while she worked at her undergraduate alma mater. After completing her master’s degree, she held positions in career services, first year experience, academic advising, and new student orientation at two different institutions in the Midwest. After the stress
of her role in new student orientation was impacting their ability to start a family, Maeve and her husband decided to relocate closer to their families. Maeve then worked for an international association focused on student success for a few years before transitioning to her current role.

In her current role, Maeve oversees support for student wellbeing, which includes connecting students to mental health resources, providing education related to student wellness, and offering academic success support programs like mentoring and tutoring. Maeve started in this role five weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic began and caused shelter in place to become common in the United States, so the way she needed to approach her new responsibilities shifted unexpectedly. She said it was strange to supervise over 40 tutors and to never have met any of them in person.

Maeve has practiced yoga on and off for about 10 to 15 years. She was first introduced to yoga when she was an undergraduate student. At that time, phone apps just came out and she found a free yoga app that offered beginner workouts that she began to use regularly and enjoy. Eventually, she purchased yoga DVDs as well. When she transitioned to one of her first professional positions after completing her master’s program, she attended some yoga classes on campus sporadically while she continued to practice at home. When she transitioned to another institution that was larger and had more fitness classes, she and a coworker would go to a yoga class together one or two times per week.

Since she relocated closer to family, she transitioned back to practicing by herself using yoga apps. Maeve said, “It was always something that I found myself coming back to because I liked the way that it made me feel…it was a good way to stretch and just
work muscles that don’t get worked in a traditional sense.” She also did prenatal yoga while pregnant. Maeve shared that when she realized that she may have been experiencing postpartum depression and anxiety after the birth of her first child, she began seeing a therapist who helped her place less stress on herself and her own parenting expectations and more focus on sleep, which in turn impacted her ability to practice yoga and engage in other physical activity.

When she had her second child, she was able to be much more intentional about taking time for herself on a daily basis to focus on her wellness. Maeve started with walking on the treadmill and then adding in jogging, workout videos, and yoga when she was cleared to start more exercise. She said, “I wanted to make sure I wasn’t just providing lip service and that I was also embracing many of the things that I was…trying to share with our students.” Prior to working from home due to the pandemic, Maeve participated in desk yoga with some coworkers a few times a week. More recently, she got her older child engaged with trying yoga and they will do a brief practice together right after dinner, or she will practice by herself later at night after both children are asleep.

Nina

Nina is a 37-year-old White woman who has been with her husband for eight years and married to him for four. Nina is a stepmother to her husband’s two children who are ages 14 and 15. While she assumed a parenting role with her stepchildren soon after she met them, it took her some time to own her identity as a stepmother as she thought about it in relation to her professional role as a student affairs educator. Nina completed a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs. She works at a large,
private, four-year university in the Northeast in a mid-level professional role within a particular college focused on academic advising.

Nina grew up in a rural community to parents who were both teachers. She was heavily involved with dance when she was young, and this has had a lasting influence on her in her adult life. Nina studied anthropology as an undergraduate student and became involved in student leadership roles. She enjoyed her leadership experience and decided to pursue her master’s degree in higher education and student affairs while she held a graduate assistantship in career services. Nina also taught dance classes on the side, and throughout her career in student affairs she has continued to teach various dance and group fitness classes in her local community, including a yoga fusion class. Professionally, she worked in residence life and career services for a number of years before she transitioned to her current role in academic advising. Nina served in one position for three years before being promoted to her current title.

In her role, she supports students within her college with their needs outside of the classroom, including connecting them to resources or procedures like a leave of absence or confirming their degree progress. Nina also works with faculty on the academic standing process for the college and holds traditional academic advising appointments with students. She currently serves a large caseload of students because her team is understaffed compared to other colleges within the university.

Nina’s husband practiced yoga in college. Several years ago, he decided he wanted to return to classes, so Nina went with him. At a fitness instructor, she said the first few classes she attended felt very slow because she was used to the high intensity of group fitness classes. She attended those yoga classes for a while, then completed a six-
week Kundalini yoga course. Within the specific group fitness organization in which she teaches, Nina started taking a yoga fusion class that combined yoga, Tai Chi, and Pilates practices. She eventually became certified to teach the yoga fusion class and has been doing so for about three years. She explained that these classes are designed to have a specific flow that is timed with music with a meditation and relaxation at the end.

**Rio**

Rio is a 37-year-old White woman who has been married to her husband for over 10 years, and they have one child who is 2 years old. Rio completed a master’s degree in Latin American studies. She works at a small, private, four-year institution in the Southeast in a mid-level professional role focused on academic support and success.

Rio is originally from a rural town in the Northeast and moved to the Southeast as a teenager. She is the oldest of four siblings and is a first-generation college student and the first in her family to receive a master’s degree. As a child, she enjoyed chorus, band, and musical theatre and she frequently uses music now to help her relax and connect with her child. Rio studied Spanish as an undergraduate student and was involved as a tutor. After graduating, Rio worked as a Spanish teacher before returning to school to complete her master’s degree. During her graduate studies she lived abroad for six months to complete research.

While she served as a teaching assistant, Rio realized she wanted to work in higher education. She shared that as a teacher, when her class ended the relationship ended with her students and she wanted an experience where she felt like she was sitting with the students rather than standing in front of them. After graduating, she began working as an academic advisor for an institution that required her to commute to serve
students on multiple campuses. Rio then transitioned to working in financial aid, which she described as a demanding job.

In her current position, Rio coordinates the university’s academic support programs like tutoring, writing and testing center services, academic recovery programs for students on academic probation or suspension, and workshops related to study skills and other academic support issues. She works with two faculty members who support the writing center and over 20 student tutors who report directly to her.

Rio has been practicing yoga on and off for about 15 years. Rio was introduced to yoga during her final semester in college when she took a yoga class. She shared,

I feel like it was something that I could do for myself, where I think you’re in school and classes, college, you’re working toward that, whatever that next goal is…this is something that I have a genuine interest in that isn’t related to a job.

In the class, Rio learned about the history and culture of yoga, as well as the physical practice’s impact on the body. She recalled it was a “very diverse class” and was a course where she did not know anyone but left it feeling a sense of community. After graduating, Rio said she continued practicing on her own using online videos or just using her own knowledge gained from the class. She reflected on a time when she was living in another country during her master’s program, and she attended a yoga class on a beach. Rio said she frequently recalls that scene as she is doing breathwork throughout her day.

Now, Rio frequently practices at work. She shared, “I like to do it…at least twice a week. Like I said, I usually have a mat here at work, so…I don’t have an excuse not to do it.” She usually practices over her lunch break, which she will sometimes take early if
she feels like she needs a break earlier in the morning “if that means the rest of [her] day is going to go much more smoothly.” Rio also practices at night at home and on the weekend at times. An important part of Rio’s practice is a brief moment of meditation after she is home and gets her child to bed. She explained,

At the end of the day, I try to always have a cup of hot tea and that’s when I’m kind of by myself and I kind of just decompress from the day, close my eyes for a moment, and again, [take] those deep breaths.

**Sawyer**

Sawyer is a 33-year-old White, cisgender woman who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community. She is married to her wife, and they have three children, 4-year-old twins and an almost 2-year-old. Sawyer completed a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs and a Ph.D. in educational leadership. She works at a large, public, four-year university in the Midwest in a senior-level role focused on student conduct.

Sawyer grew up in a low socioeconomic status household and was a Pell-eligible, first-generation college student. She described herself as “that example first-gen student that has no idea what’s going on because nobody in my family had gone to school and so there was nobody to ask.” Sawyer studied psychology and lived on campus, which she said was really impactful for her because she felt like she was able to connect with her peers more after growing up in a home where she could not invite people over. She joined hall council and a sorority, held a student involvement leadership position, and worked in residence life. After graduating, Sawyer worked as a consultant for her sorority and was able to travel around the country before she returned to school for her master’s
degree. She held a graduate assistantship with student involvement and then worked with fraternity and sorority life in her first position after graduate school. Sawyer then transitioned to working in student conduct eight years ago. She shared that seeing the difference that higher education can make in students’ socioeconomic mobility is why she continues to work in higher education.

In her current role, Sawyer oversees the student conduct process at her university. She meets with students about behavioral and academic integrity concerns, and she supports hearing officers who work in residence life. Given the level of her role, Sawyer frequently interacts with parents and lawyers and manages other high-level student concerns. She also supervises three full-time professionals and a graduate assistant in her office.

Sawyer shared that her attention to her own wellness only recently shifted in the last year. After the pandemic began, she weighed more than she wanted to and was tired, but the pandemic gave her some clarity about her wellness needs. She explained,

I think, for me, it was such a shift of, I didn’t even realize how fast I was going. It was just the norm, right. Like it was the norm to get up at five and not stop until like 11-something. And no time for myself in there, or exercise or anything in there. Just taking care of shit, right. And you know, work from eight to five without even so much as taking a drink of water, right. And then, when the world stopped, and I actually got to like, see my kids and be here, that was a really big difference. And I’m not going back. I can’t do that again.

Sawyer began to realize that during the time she did get to spend with her children before this change, she was still so distracted or consumed by work.
Sawyer practices yoga at home using online videos one to three times a week and she has been practicing consistently for about six months. Prior to having children, Sawyer said she attended yoga classes sporadically at a YMCA. She said,

> When I’ve done it, I’ve really enjoyed it in terms of it having both the physical and kind of mental aspects, I think, is really a good draw for me. When I started this kind of round, it started as more like the recovery day. So, it was like…strength and cardio six days a week and then the seventh day was like a yoga, recovery, stretching, whatever kind of thing. As I kind of progressed, I was kind of finding that sometimes, I would just rather do yoga.

Sawyer found the yoga library through an online, on-demand fitness platform she uses and began practicing those, especially if she “had a harder day.” She has a yoga mat on each floor of her house to make the practice accessible to her. The yoga practices she does vary based on how she is feeling that day and what the video descriptions say, but she noted she tends to choose more active practices than slow ones. Some days her practice is as short as 10 minutes but most days she will practice for 30 to 45 minutes.

**Veradis**

Veradis is a 45-year-old White woman who has been married to her husband for over 20 years and they have two children, ages 10 and 14. She shared that her husband is not White, and she is thus part of a multiracial family which impacts her experience as a wife and mother. Veradis completed a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs. She works at a large, public, four-year university in the Mountain West region of the United States in a mid-level professional role focused on academic advising. Veradis has been working in academic advising for 19 years.
Veradis grew up in the Midwest and spent a lot of time outside on farms exploring barns and fishing. She shared she has always loved school and she fully intended to move away from home for college but ultimately had concerns about her readiness to do so, so she attended the university in her hometown, where she studied psychology. Veradis lived at home her first semester before moving on campus and she became involved with new student orientation and peer advising. After graduating, she began her master’s program and held an assistantship in academic advising. Veradis then worked in the Southeast in academic and career services in a generalist role that supported a variety of student life functions. She realized she wanted a position that was more focused on student contact and transitioned into academic advising. Her family soon relocated to another state, and she stayed home with her young child for nine months before working at a community college for a year and then transitioning to her current institution, where she has been for almost 10 years.

In her current role, Veradis supervises nine full-time staff and three graduate students. Her team supports incoming first-year and transfer students with academic advising needs. She also partners with colleagues who oversee scholarships and new student orientation and offers academic programs to students.

Veradis has been practicing yoga regularly for about four years. She first signed up for a course through her local community college before she had children, would attend the class once a week after work, and would fall asleep in her mat every single week. She said, “It was a physical practice, but it wasn’t something that I engaged with, you know, mentally or emotionally, and it just wasn’t the right fit.”
Veradis was reintroduced to yoga through a clinician at her institution’s wellness center who offered yoga in one of the art galleries on campus. Veradis said she would occasionally go to a studio, but she felt very aware of the people around her and it was more difficult to be present with her own body. At some point, she received a recommendation to try practicing at home through a popular, free yoga channel on an online video platform. Every January, the channel offers a 30-day yoga journey to help people build their yoga practice. She has done that several times and also uses many of the other resources offered on the channel. When the pandemic began, Veradis began a more consistent practice, typically in the morning, which has become a routine for her. Veradis shared,

I got into the routine of, I’d get up, I would take my mat out on the deck, I’d do my practice in the morning, I’d go for a walk through the neighborhood, and I would come home and eat breakfast and start my day. And starting my day with choices made based on what I needed and not what my family needed or what my to-do list needed just has been phenomenal in changing my mindset. And there’s a lot less that I feel like I’m walking around saying, “I have to,” it’s more, “I choose to.”

She said if she does not sleep well or has a hard time getting up, she just lets it go and will practice later in the day.

Veradis’s practice can vary day-to-day. Some days she uses a video and others she just lets herself move. Some days she practices for five minutes, and some days her practice is an hour. Veradis said it is typically a physical practice with some breathwork and “trying to be really present.” Often, she will incorporate some journaling after her
practice that may center around what the online yoga instructor might share as a point of reflection or meditation in the video she watched that day. She also engages with the online community related to that yoga channel and expressed surprise for how much she has received from communicating with others about her yoga practice.

**Life Stories of Student Affairs Mothers**

The life stories of student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice expand upon the individual participant vignettes and go deeper into the participants’ lived experiences. The mothers shared stories of when their identities as women first became salient to them as student affairs educators. They also explained their journeys into motherhood and discussed when their identities as mothers became salient to them in relation to their work. These narratives—which demonstrate themes such as leadership disparities women face in student affairs, lost professional opportunities, adjusting to life with a newborn, and pregnancy and infant loss and infertility struggles—are not often found in literature related to student affairs educators who are mothers. The life stories of these student affairs mothers are unique and yet overlapping, creating the themes presented here which ultimately weave together with their yoga practice and additional professional experiences.

**Understanding Identity as a Woman in Student Affairs**

Since this study focused on women who identify as student affairs educators and mothers, it was important to understand when the participants noted their identity as a woman first became salient to them as a student affairs educator. Most participants noted a lack of women’s representation in certain leadership positions within their institutions, while others reflected on particular, often negative, experiences where their identity as a
woman was prominent. Some of the women also commented on the obligation they felt to improve opportunities for other women in the profession.

**Noticing a Lack of Women in Leadership**

The majority of the participants noted a lack of representation of women in upper-level administrator positions. For some, this realization came during their master’s program, and for others it became more prominent in their professional roles.

Nina shared that her time in her master’s program was when her identity as a woman first became salient to her as a student affairs educator. In one of her classes, they discussed where women hold positions in higher education and student affairs in relation to men. Nina said, “I started to realize…you do tend to see this shift where it’s like women, you know entry-level, mid-level…then it starts to kind of taper off at the director level, and then you see more men…in the higher-level administrative positions.” Maeve had a similar experience in graduate school when she noticed how female heavy student affairs was as a profession. She noted that when she was working at her alma mater, “everybody who was in an admin role or like a support role was female, and then it seemed as though everybody who was making the decisions was male, with the exception, at the time, our dean was female.”

Sawyer remarked that when she moved into student conduct there were fewer women working in that functional area. Delaney observed that in her first professional role after her master’s program, her colleagues were primarily men, as was the president and his cabinet. Charlotte described how she has observed, in general, that “upper leadership is male-dominated.” Betty shared that as she began working at her institution, she had conversations with the dean of students about “what it is like to be the only, like,
woman that’s at the table.” Betty further noticed the lack of women in senior leadership when she was asked to attend the president’s cabinet meetings to speak about her work and the entire cabinet was comprised of men.

Collectively, these women experienced community among women in graduate school through mid-level positions but began to question their capacity for career advancement as a woman due to the dearth of women’s representation at higher levels of institutional leadership.

Feeling a Personal Impact in the Professional Role

Several participants shared their identity as a woman first became salient to them as a student affairs educator when they experienced a particular impact in their professional role due to their identity as a woman. Clara said the first time she remembered her identity as a woman being salient to her was when she was working at a college and serving on a committee in which she was the only woman, and a lot of the work got passed off on to her. Delaney also offered that a pivotal moment for her was in her first professional role after her master’s program where her colleagues were primarily men, as was the president and his cabinet. She said, “I was not confident, and I remember letting a lot of things go and not speaking up for myself.” When she transitioned to student conduct work, Sawyer noted that “certain students will not respond well to having that kind of meeting with a woman.” Other colleagues have been unnecessarily concerned for Sawyer’s safety in conduct meetings as a woman. She shared, “In eight years, there’s been one time, where I was like, ‘Am I going to press this [emergency] button in the next few minutes?’”
Veradis commented on her relationship with her current supervisor, who is a man. She said, “In my work experience, more often than not, in the community I’m a part of, like the individual unit tends to be predominantly women.” She further shared, I’ve started to think about gender and leadership more in, in the current, my current experience, in part because of the dynamic between myself and my director, but also because I’m plugged into a community of women who are engaged in learning about themselves as leaders, within like, my division. Veradis explained her supervisor is a man who is younger than her who started three weeks before her, and she feels he is very guarded about what he informs her of and includes her in as an assistant director, which makes her “feel limited.”

Rio talked about how her approach to working with students differed from that of her colleagues who identified as men. Prior to working in student affairs, Rio was a teacher and said her identity as a woman first became salient to her in that context when she began to realize that teaching was not providing her with the types of interactions with students that she wanted. She said she is the oldest child of four and always felt care, concern, and listening were at the core of who she is, but she did not always get to engage that as a teacher. She also noted that she would approach her work with a different level of empathy toward students than her male counterparts. This realization became prominent to her when she was in graduate school and noticed that she enjoyed the relationships she was building with students during her office hours more than being in front of the classroom.
In these examples, the participants began to pay more attention to their identity as women because they recognized the disparate impact or expectation of work placed upon them because of their identity as a woman.

**Illuminating a Leadership Path for Other Women**

Four participants described the importance of illuminating the leadership path for other women in relation to their identity as a woman student affairs educator. Charlotte described how, as a woman with some level of power, it is important to her to be a role model for other women, especially up-and-coming women leaders. She said, “It was important for me to be able to authentically show what it’s like to balance this life and motherhood because I had never seen it before. Everyone left and then came back once their kids went to school.”

Julia shared,

I recently participated in a mentorship program for women at my university…you know, really looking at my role as a woman within the university community and how can we support each other and partner with each other and I felt I needed support. So, I…joined as a mentee and, and hopefully in the future I will pay that forward by being a mentor.

Delaney was the only participant to share a story about a woman mentor and supervisor who profoundly impacted the way she has chosen to lead as a woman in student affairs:

I think the supervisor I am today is largely because of her. It’s about relationships. It’s about caring for people, letting them know they’re valued. You know, we
can’t always pay people more, but we can make them feel valued and she did that in a lot of creative ways.

Delaney said she feels like she needs to be “that role model and mentor” to the other women on her staff who are direct reports.

Related to these observations about a lack of women in leadership, Sawyer talked about how she watches “the women who come before me and are in the higher-level positions, kind of watching how they navigate being like, which parts of that do I want to adapt and which parts of that do I not want to.” She expanded this by saying,

I heard recently from a friend that an upper-level administrator at a different school had kind of said, when she was our age, that women really had to choose, and she chose career…We are seeming to try and like figure this out in a way that they didn’t think they could, and so it’s interesting to me that folks will say those types of things, but at the same time, enact policies or whatever that really kind of prohibit that advancement of women who are trying to do both.

Sawyer’s reflection summarizes the undercurrent of what many of the participants implied with their responses regarding their identities as women; most are in a position where they feel they are trying to navigate being a student affairs mother without many prior examples, thus encouraging some of them to be that example for future generations of women student affairs leaders who are mothers.

The Journey into Motherhood

Each woman’s journey into motherhood was unique. Some women described relatively smooth transitions into motherhood with adequate support from their partners, but most noted some challenge that stood out in the beginning of their experience as a
mother. Four women experienced pregnancy or infant loss or infertility, which left a lasting impression on them as mothers. Without prompting, most of the women who were able to conceive easily noted in some way that they were lucky or grateful to have had that experience because they knew it was not the experience of all women who try to become pregnant.

**Receiving Support from Partners**

Betty, Delaney, and Nina all described relatively smooth transitions into motherhood, which often involved important conversations with and support from their partners. Betty was not always sure that she wanted to have children but described a family gathering at her cousin’s house for Christmas that made her reconsider having children. She explained her cousin just had a baby and said, “I held the baby and had this moment of like, ‘I want one of these.’” When Betty began dating her now-husband again after a period apart, she had to have a conversation with him about this because previously they had discussed not having children. Her husband is eight years older than her, so once they got married, they did have children fairly soon. Betty said “it was an easy journey” for them, that she enjoyed being pregnant, and she had easy pregnancies and births with both of her children.

Unlike Betty, Delaney shared that she always felt she wanted to be a mother. She said she was fortunate to have an easy time becoming pregnant and acknowledged that is not what everyone’s experience is like. Her first child arrived five weeks early and she said, “It was probably the first time in my life where I’m like, ‘You’re really not in control anymore.’” Her husband had accrued a lot of vacation time, so he was able to be home with her and the baby for over a month right after the birth and then stayed home...
with the baby for a few months when Delaney returned to work. Delaney talked about the importance of partnering well. She said, “Really try to find someone who understands your goals and is going to be an equal partner in parenting or your career, you know, whatever that means to you.”

Nina is a stepmother to two teenagers but when she first met her now-husband, the children were much younger. They initially spent time together without the children, and then “as it was starting to get more serious, we…had discussions about what does that point look like. And he also wanted to be really careful of, you know, not introducing them to someone that wasn’t doing to stick around.” After six or seven months of dating her husband, Nina met his children. She said, “I kind of started being in that parenting role almost right away, because you know, I would be hanging out with them, and you know, typical sibling behavior [would happen].” Nina said that something that has always been clear with the children is that her husband is the one who is gets to establish rules and expectations with them. She has a good relationship with both children and she feels lucky to have such a strong relationship with them, as that is not always the case between stepchildren and stepparents.

*Adjusting to Life with a Newborn*

Charlotte, Julia, and Clara all described different challenges adjusting to life with a newborn, which all related to expectations they had for themselves as mothers or the expectations they felt were placed on them by others. Charlotte felt that she had her children when she was older and said her first child was an “easy baby” but shared she was “not an easy mom,” in that she experienced a lot of worry and anxiety. She described the learning curve of nursing and being physically attached to a human by saying, “I
didn’t realize how much time I needed to myself to just feel like myself.” When she returned to work, she said she was “just so attached to what I believed things should be, right, I should be like this, I should be like that.” She talked about having the same expectations for herself to perform her job in ways that she did prior to having a child:

I was pushing against what my own perception should have, that like you should be able to be up until one in the morning doing that paperwork, because you were able to do this before, and now you’re not good enough…of a professional, you’re not good enough of a mom because you’re not loving the 3:00 a.m. feeding.

She said her first child ultimately taught her to let go of some expectations but if she could go back in time, she would still tell herself to be more flexible.

When describing her journey into motherhood, Julia said, “I am not a natural mother.” She said while she was growing up, she did not think she wanted to be a parent. When she began to get older, she “recognized the value of family” and said once she met her husband, she felt she could see herself adding to the family. She stated, “When you meet a good partner who you think that you could have children with, that helps tremendously.” Julia said she did struggle when her first child arrived, saying she felt physically and emotionally drained, and it was a struggle to adjust to our new reality. We did it. But, you know, some people bounce right back and are able to just jump back into work. One of my colleagues just had a baby in January and she was back to work in March, and I was blown away because I could barely form a sentence for months. So, it was a slow process. I feel like I was just kind of a little bit behind, maybe, than other people.
Clara also said she was not certain if she wanted to be a mother, but she reached a certain point in her life when she and her husband agreed to start a family. Her first child had colic and cried a lot, which was a struggle for Clara because she had limited support due to her husband’s lack of paternity leave and them living away from family. She shared an experience of feeling shamed by colleagues when she brought her baby to work one day while on maternity leave because the baby would not stop crying due to colic. She said,

I don’t think people really understood like, the stress level that that was when I took her. And I left. And when I returned from my maternity leave, you know, it was talked about, about how I couldn’t, you know, I couldn’t take care of her.

**Experiencing Pregnancy or Infant Loss and Infertility**

Four of the student affairs mothers’ journeys into motherhood were marked by pregnancy or infant loss or infertility. Veradis summarized the difficulty of living through these realities as she reflected on her own experience with infant loss:

I often say that each type of loss has its own element of being the worst kind of loss. …I think you’re more in tune with the range of pain and suffering when you, when you’ve been there, and been willing to sit with it and explore it and are willing to be vulnerable about it.

Veradis disclosed that in between having her two children, she experienced the loss of a child through stillbirth. She shared,

Depending on the context and the safety, sometimes you know, we’ll talk about our three [children] and will name all three of them. And that’s part of that community of mothers, like I, having been through a loss has made me more
aware of mothering and how that’s different, and how the experiences are so varied.

She went on to say,

That experience really altered my, the value of, of work in my bigger picture. So, it was kind of that, my first realization that this place will go on without me. I took my six weeks of medical leave, didn’t think about work at all, and when I came back, I was there physically but not mentally or emotionally. And, so it was a really important lesson of, I am more than what I do at work.

Veradis shared she started to pay more attention to her wellness when she returned to work after losing her second child. She said, “I started recognizing that there’s more to me than work and my role and my family, that there was this other piece that I needed to attend to.”

Rio said that when she was younger, she took on a lot of responsibility with her three younger siblings, so she did not think she was going to become a mother. As she matured, she began to believe being a mother was something she could do. After Rio met and married her husband, they began to think about having a child and talked about what that would look like together. She said they are both planners, so they made a five-year plan of all the things they would like to accomplish before trying to have a child. When they did try to become pregnant, Rio first experienced a miscarriage. However, a few months later she became pregnant again and later gave birth to her son. Rio said that upon returning from her maternity leave, she quickly realized how much more time she needed in her schedule to accommodate taking care of herself as she was pumping breastmilk to feed her child.
Maeve shared that she and her husband struggled with infertility for three years before successfully becoming pregnant with their first child through in vitro fertilization (IVF). She struggled with postpartum depression and anxiety after giving birth to her first child. She said,

I think our field can exacerbate it because we’re just expected to always be going and always be on top of it and we’re just always, you know, trying to go 110 miles an hour. And then once you have a child and you’re like wait, first of all, my brain chemistry is completely different than it was when I left my position, you know, 12 weeks ago or whatnot. But then the fact that your brain is trying to process just keeping another human alive and trying to keep your job and your benefits and all of that is just, it’s just a lot to put on somebody who has just evicted a child from their body.

Maeve was prepared to go through the IVF process when she and her husband wanted to have a second child, but she ended up becoming pregnant on her own, much to her surprise.

Sawyer and her wife knew they wanted to have children, which would require a sperm donor and support from a doctor, but what she did not anticipate was the infertility challenges she encountered while trying to conceive. Sawyer underwent several unsuccessful intrauterine insemination (IUI) trials before trying IVF, which was successful and resulted in a twin pregnancy for her. She also had another child through IVF a little over two years later. Sawyer mentioned that there’s definitely a lot wrapped up in fertility and…womanhood, and that identity. Because that was part of the reason why it’s so hard, at least it was so hard for me,
was this, so you’re supposed to be able to do, as a woman, like just do this. People do it on accident all the damn time, right? So, and that’s pretty common. You know, I connected with a lot of people who’ve had infertility stuff…and that seems to be a common piece, of like, if women are having trouble conceiving, then that feels like a failure as a woman.

As Sawyer alluded to, these perspectives of loss and infertility are often not discussed openly in United States society, and they are seldom discussed in the workplace. For most of these women, the journey into motherhood was complicated and left them to determine how well or easily their identity as a mother would integrate with their roles as student affairs educators.

**Understanding Identity as a Mother in Student Affairs**

The participants in this study all acknowledged experiences when their identity as a mother became salient to them as a student affairs educator. For many, this came in the form of colleagues and supervisors questioning whether they could continue to perform in their role. For others, their identity became salient when they realized they were treated differently or missed out on professional opportunities because they had been on maternity leave. Several women also commented on how they recognized their identity as a mother in relation how they viewed students, and two commented on how becoming a mother led them to create new boundaries at work.

**Questioning Capacity and Loss of Opportunity**

Charlotte, Clara, Delaney, Julia, Nina, and Sawyer all referenced experiences when they had their capacity as an employee questioned or missed out on professional opportunities as a student affairs educator and mother. Charlotte shared,
I was definitely overlooked…for some roles because I happened to be pregnant. …There’s definitely been those moments where you’re just kind of like, subtle questioning based on what people know about you or your circumstances and whether you can keep up with the work.

Delaney explained that when she returned to work from her maternity leave after birthing her first child, she felt that coworkers acted a little differently toward her and felt like they were wondering if she was not going to be as reliable. Delaney said this was in part just in her head, “but not completely. You know, I do think people thought it would impact my work.”

When Clara returned from her first maternity leave, she began to notice the difference in expectations between employees who were mothers and fathers. She said, I started to just notice the difference in what, you know, what I needed to perform my job to balance everything and also the differences…between the mothers and fathers on campus. …I noticed a definite difference in what was expected of me and what’s expected of the people who were going to become fathers on campus. Clara said this impacted how she felt about herself, her work ethic, and what she felt she needed to put forth to be seen as similar to her peers.

Julia shared an example in which she also felt like she lost out on a new opportunity:

When I was on maternity leave with my first daughter, they posted a leadership role that really had my name all over it, and I never really got the opportunity to apply for it. And that was certainly a defining moment for me in terms of questioning, like, what is my role here? Why isn’t this maternity leave more of a
real thing, where I was still seen as a valued member of the team who was just taking a break? And I do think that for me, since then, I’ve been thinking a lot more carefully about what I do and how I do it and what is the right balance for me. I think about that a lot.

When she was ready to return to work after having her second child, Julia very much had a mindset that she was returning to work as a mother, and she would need more flexibility in her job. This led her to seek out a different opportunity.

Nina’s coworker invited her to join the Student Affairs Moms Facebook group and at first, she felt like she did not belong in the group until her coworker reminded her that she does have children even though she is a stepparent. Nina explained that it took her a little while to fully understand and acknowledge the significance of her role with the children. She said, “It’s kind of like, you know, maybe just a struggle that I’ve had of like, I’m not just this extra person that’s around, like I actually have a role.” Nina went on to say that when she worked at a different institution, she felt awkward telling her boss that she needed to occasionally pick up the children because there was an assumption that “you’re just the stepparent…there are two actual parents that could go do this…why does it have to be you?” Nina’s current environment is completely different and supportive of whatever she needs to do to take care of family.

While other women referenced the professional opportunities they felt they lost by becoming a mother, Sawyer reflected on the loss of time with her children. Sawyer began thinking of her identity as a mother “during the infertility process, which sounds kind of weird because you’re not one yet, but you’re grieving not being one.” She also had to navigate the maternity leave process and said that to take a leave at her institution,
she needed to save up vacation time and sick time. When she went on leave with her
twins, she had plenty of sick time saved up to use, but when she had her third child it was
more difficult because she had just used all of her sick time two years prior for her leave
with the twins.

She said, “Returning to work is its whole thing. I always knew I was going to be a
working mom, that was never a question for me. But man is it hard to go back after
maternity leave.” She mentioned it was hard adjusting to the realization that there would
be experiences she would miss out on from her children’s lives because she could not be
with them all the time. Sawyer also noted navigating “daycare, like you know, drop-off
and pick up and timing and cost. Like, it’s, it’s just impossible. We create impossible
situations for working moms.”

*Viewing Students Differently*

Veradis, Charlotte, and Rio all commented on how their identity as a mother
influenced how they interact with students. For Veradis, this actually began before she
even was a mother. Veradis felt a mothering identity in her first professional role where
she was supervising a staff of 30 peer mentors. Someone at her current office also refers
to her as the “mother hen of the office.” She said, “I’ve always been in that caretaker role,
whether it’s been, you know, biological or my family children or not.”

Charlotte said that when she returned to work from her first maternity leave, she
found herself thinking about her child in the future in relation to her role at work:

It’s always sitting in the back of my mind is…how would I want him to be
treated…if he ever goes away to school…what type of person do I want him
interacting with? And that’s always now in the back of my head…with my parent phone calls is, how would I want to be treated?

Rio said that once she was pregnant with her son and began telling people about her pregnancy, her identity as a mother began to become more prominent. She explained that she began to see her students as someone’s children, which changed how she viewed her interactions parents as well.

Creating New Boundaries

Betty and Maeve discussed the need to create new boundaries with their work when they became student affairs mothers. After returning from her first maternity leave, Betty attended a Title IX training in which the presenter was reviewing a high-profile court case about a child alleged to have been abused and murdered by her mother. Betty said hearing about this case made her consider the impact of engaging with her work with gender-based violence survivors while at home. She shared,

I have heard horrible [stories]…and that was the first, like, time that I had this moment of like…I didn’t worry about that stuff or I didn’t think about it, and now…having kids, like, it is something that just shifted for me, and it became really hard for me. …I think I would bring work home all the time and…I kind of have to [because] I’m on call. …and for me, like, doing that type of work with the kid…I don’t want to mesh those two. Right, like, I don’t want to be meshing a sexual assault with my child…and so I try really hard now [to make sure] work stays at work…I can’t find a way to bridge my family life with the sexual assault part of my workplace. I think it’s easier with the healthy sexuality stuff and that certainly comes up a lot…especially when we’re talking about gender dynamics.
Also thinking about boundaries as a new mother, Maeve explained that when she returned from her maternity leave after giving birth to her first child, she was “a very different person” who was “much more protective of [her] time,” and she “figured out what was important and what wasn’t important” and what she was going to worry about and not worry about. She talked about no longer working so hard to make certain tasks successful if other people around her were not going to do their part because she values her own time and energy that needs to be dedicated in multiple places now as a mother.

In each of these stories, the women had to navigate how their identities as mothers interlaced with their roles as student affairs educators. For many of the women, coming to understand their identity as a student affairs mother was marked by negative perceptions of their new familial role and assumptions that it would hinder their capacities to be a productive employee. Other women reflected on how their role as mothers changed their approach working with students and changed the relationship they were willing to have with their work.

**Reasons for Engaging in Yoga as a Wellness Practice**

Each of the participants were able to articulate what compels them to engage in yoga as a wellness practice. For most women, this realization came after practicing consistently and noting the benefits, which then led them to want to maintain their practice. The majority of participants commented on the physical benefits of their practice, but many also discussed improved mental awareness and presence, stress management, and a self-check-in that was important to them, particularly as working mothers. All of the participants offered how their perspective of wellness has changed
over time, and many explained that their perspective shifted from a focus on physical health or appearance to a more holistic view of wellness often due to their yoga practice.

**Body Awareness and Physical Benefits**

Many of the participants described how yoga provides them with more body awareness and various physical benefits. Rio, Betty, and Maeve all commented on how their yoga practice helped them through pregnancy and labor. Betty and Charlotte talked about how their yoga practice makes them more mindful of what their body does and needs throughout the day, and Sawyer said she is more aware of how stress forms in her body. Julia said,

> Yoga forces me to, you know, kind of keep a balance and not eat too much, eat things that are good for my body. It makes me more mindful about what’s happening within my body…there’s a whole head-to-toe physical awareness that comes out of it once you start doing it every day that spills over into all aspects of your life.

Julia also indicated that yoga helps her relax at the end of the day, sleep better, and counters the side effects of sitting at a computer all day. She has lost weight and feels stronger and more flexible.

Similarly, Sawyer said that since she began exercising or practicing yoga daily, she has lost 20 pounds, so she physically feels better. Veradis noticed her practice has made her feel physically stronger and more flexible. She also shared, “I’ve learned how to relax my body and my mind, so I feel like that’s improved my quality of sleep.” Nina explained she is often pretty sedentary during the workday, so yoga allows her to stretch and lengthen her muscles. Likewise, Rio mentioned that her practice promotes relaxation,
an ability to move better, strength, and flexibility. Delaney also shared that yoga helps balance out other physical activity, especially since it helps with flexibility and balance, which she is very attuned to as she ages.

**Mental Engagement**

Several participants talked about how their yoga practice helps them be more mentally engaged, patient, and present in the moment. Betty said yoga helps her be present in the moment and stay grounded. Charlotte shared yoga helps her be more mindful during the day, paying better attention to what she is experiencing. She noted it helps her manage anxiety, gives her more confidence, and allows her to be more vulnerable. She shared,

I think I am…capable now of reading a room a little bit more intentionally because I don’t feel like I need to contribute all the time…I think my emotional intelligence has been increased, based on the practice because I know myself more…I’m not so worried about myself and how I’m showing up in a room.

Charlotte’s yoga practice also allows her to be more present with each of her children for one-on-one time with them. Sawyer also commented on how her practice helps her cultivate more patience and presence for her kids. Delaney noted her yoga practice helps calm anxiety, grounds her, makes her feel present, more aware, and more mindful. It allows her to “connect internally.” Julia said she has noticed it helps with her focus and ability to remain calm and it allows her to be more mindful in the moment. Nina also indicated yoga increases her mindfulness and helps her to be more present.

**Stress Management**
Charlotte, Clara, and Maeve specifically referenced how their practice provides stress management. Charlotte explained yoga feels like a “wringing out” for her day. It allows her to release stress from the day and encourages her to hold on to what sustains her and to let go of the rest. She said,

When things have gone well is when I’ve been authentic. When I’ve been able to be who I actually am as opposed to who other people want me to be. So, I think I’ve really come to that through yoga.

Clara commented on her yoga practice:

I’ve done it for so long now, I know how great I feel. You know, it doesn’t matter what is going on, I can do yoga and you know, leave things on the mat and you know, walk away from it. It really helps me focus and work our any stress or tension that I’m feeling.

Clara’s meditation practice also helps with stress levels, relaxation, and finding a pause throughout the day.

Maeve remarked that her yoga practice “is kind of that way to just let myself decompress and I know that my anxiety is lower when I do it.” She explained that “the stress relief and the relaxation piece specifically are the big benefits for me.” Maeve said she enjoys practicing yoga because “you can take it to any level that you want.”

**Personal Check-In**

Betty, Rio, and Veradis all commented on how their yoga practice is self-care that is just for them, which feels vital as a working mother. Betty said her yoga practice is “a way to self-care on like an ongoing, active basis and really just like, time for myself.” She clarified,
I think, as both a mother and in student affairs…it’s always caring for others, right. So, like my whole life is about caring for my kids and my husband and my family and then at work…I’m caring for students and, you know, my staff members that volunteer with the office. And yoga feels like the one aspect of my life that really is about like, carving time for myself and caring for myself in a way that I don’t normally do in other areas of my life.

Betty also said that as a student affairs mother, “I feel like my brain is constantly in 100 spaces, whereas like yoga is like my 20-to-30-minute time one or two days a week where like I can just like slow down and organize my brain.”

Rio commented,

I feel that [yoga] is the first, it’s the investment in myself. That it’s time that I’m saying that…it’s worth it, I’m worth it, and I’m worth feeling good. And [it] just…helps me just kind of clear my mind, in a way that I haven’t found that other things can. I always leave it and I feel better.

She also said, “It’s about finding calm in the chaos. That so many times you, both as a student affairs practitioner and mother, what you think your day is going to look like will be changed very drastically.”

Veradis shared,

I think the biggest purpose that my yoga practice serves is just to ensure that I’m continuing to fill the cup. I think, you know, as a mom…and then someone in a helping profession who supervises staff, I’m continually in that mode of giving. And in order to do my job well and to meet my own standards, I’ve got to be able to replenish. And I think modeling that importance of time to oneself and
identifying what does fill your cup is important as part of my role as a parent and as my role as a, as a mentor and colleague.

Veradis said she is quicker to identify negative self-talk because of her yoga practice and she has learned that she can follow through on an intention she sets for herself.

For these women, yoga provided them with improvements to their physical and mental wellness and it gave them tools to better manage stress. As articulated by several participants, the dedicated time to themselves is important as student affairs mothers who feel like they are constantly taking care of others either at work or at home.

**Sustaining a Yoga Practice**

As student affairs educators who are mothers, the women noted that sustaining a yoga practice requires certain intentionality. For many of the participants, sustaining their practice means ensuring their partner understands their desire to practice and could be present to support children. Some women also commented on the importance of their children understanding why mom needs time to herself. Three participants discussed how carving out time to practice at work rather than at home was critical to sustaining their practice. Participants also noted that to sustain their practice, they needed to maintain a particular mindset.

**Partner Support and Children’s Understanding**

Partners played an important role in many participants’ ability to sustain their yoga practice. Often, the women needed to have conversations with their partners to balance family responsibilities while they could make time to practice. Several women also talked about their children’s understanding of their practice, and some even have their children practice with them. Delaney shared:
At the time I started doing yoga, I was in my Ph.D. program, and I was doing that graduate assistantship, so I didn’t have the grind of a full-time job. So, I think that helped, and I…learned the practice and I realized the benefits of it, so it became habit. So, when my life got tremendously busier, when I worked full-time, it was easier to keep it incorporated in my life.

When her family relocated to another state, Delaney explained that she would go to an early morning yoga class before her family woke up. Her husband and children recognize that it is important to her and do not question it, and they even got her another yoga mat for Mother’s Day, so she does not have to bring her favorite mat back and forth between her two homes.

Betty said, “My husband knows that like, I need to work out every morning and go for a walk and if I don’t do that, like, it throws my whole day off.” Betty also attends the yoga nidra class she offers on campus and said there are definitely conversations that take place with her husband when she stays at work for the evening yoga nidra class. Since she typically wakes up early to work out or practice yoga at home once a week, sometimes her older child wakes up and comes to the basement with her to workout with her or engage in their own activities. She said, “I feel like, for my yoga practice…I really want the quiet and the peace and the solitude to be able to really connect with my practice and it’s harder to do that with a family and children.”

Charlotte shared that as she began therapy her husband “could totally tell that…stuff was going on, and he’s like ‘I just want you to be happy, so yeah, I’ll cook the kids dinner and that’s not a big deal.’” Charlotte remarked that it was very difficult for her to initially articulate that she needed help, but she said, “Once I articulated it, it’s
never been a question.” Her children understand that when she leaves in the evening to practice yoga “it’s mommy’s time.” She clarified, “They know that that’s my kind of time to decompress and do something that I really like to do.” She described how sometimes when she is practicing her hands will extend out under the door in her nook and she will be greeted with tickles back from one of her kids.

Julia shared that in order to sustain her yoga practice,

I told my husband that he has to do the dishes and be in charge of the kids after dinner. So, every night after dinner around 7:30 I disappear upstairs for about an hour, and I take that time for myself. So sometimes it’s as simple as just like, getting ready for bed and a little bit of yoga, sometimes it’s a lot of yoga.

Julia said her children also understand that she does yoga every night and they understand that they get a better mama out of it…I think that they see I disappear for that half an hour or whatever, and I come back, and I’m relaxed and then I go right back into parenting, and it’s bedtime and cuddles and books and I can be more present.

Sawyer talked about how her wife has always done a good job of finding time to work out, and she recognized she “was kind of pissed about it.” She went on to say, No one ever told me I couldn’t do that, like, so why, why am I creating this reality that I can’t take this time. Right? And so, yes, there, there was an intentional conversation with…my wife to say, I want to do this…I want to make this change, so I need you to help me in that, of like, helping me make it a priority.
Sawyer said since having that conversation, it is now part of their routine and her wife knows that when Sawyer wants to practice, she will watch the kids, or Sawyer will most often practice when they are asleep.

Veradis shared “it’s been a process for her family” to understand her practice. When she has decided to practice later in the day, one of her children has come in and interrupted her and asked about dinner. She then had a conversation with him about not interrupting her time. At other times, she has participated in a live online class and was downstairs practicing for longer than she said she would be. She said these moments have resulted in teaching her kids that “we need to honor what’s important to other people, not just what our priorities are.”

Maeve practices right after dinner and tries to involve her older child in her practice through a popular children’s yoga channel on an online video platform. If she does not practice with him, she will practice by herself later at night and her husband knows that if either of the kids wake up, he is responsible for going to check on them. Maeve shared that what she enjoys about individual or at home practice is that she does not feel like she has to rush to be somewhere for a class at a specific time; practicing using an app or online video is always accessible.

Clara shared that her children practice yoga with her now:

I want to make sure that I’m setting a good example for them to, for their overall wellness, and that they’re…learning from a young age how to use tools and techniques so they can deal with their own self and their own stress [as] they grow up.

Practicing at Work
Betty, Clara, and Rio regularly practice yoga at work, which ensures they are making time in their schedule for their practice. This is either a structured class offered on their campus or simply practicing on their own in their office or another space. Betty said practicing “feels easier when it is scheduled and a part of like, work,” but since the yoga nidra class is only offered during the academic year, she does not engage in that practice during the summer.

Clara said that once she returned to campus after several months of working from home due to the pandemic, she began carving out time in her workday to be able to practice at work using a wellness room on campus. This was less hectic for her than trying to fit it in at home when her children require her attention. In the past, she would also use her lunch break to attend a yoga class off campus.

Rio also practices at work because she noticed that she is often too tired to practice at night and needs physical movement earlier in her day. She said that in order to sustain this, she needs to have her yoga mat at the office, as well as stretchy or comfortable clothes and calming music, and she will try to focus on looking out at campus through her window.

**Personal Mindset**

Several of the student affairs mothers commented on the personal mindset they have needed to cultivate to maintain their yoga practice. Betty said that in order to sustain her yoga practice, it is important for her to find “the personal value in it,” recognize the benefits of it, and be aware of the consequences of not practicing. Similarly, Charlotte said it is important for her to “focus on the benefits, the long-term benefits and not necessarily the short-term inconvenience.” Veradis said, “I need the intention. I need a
little bit of time. And a little bit of space. And just a willingness to show up. And that’s it.”

Maeve said that in order to sustain her practice, she needs to be in the mindset of incorporating movement into her day. She knows she gets more out of her practice if she can dedicate 20-40 minutes to it, so she said, “I need to be in a place where my schedule also allows me to do [that].”

Nina shared that since she is a group fitness instructor, she has a lot of accountability built in for herself through that role. She needs variety in her yoga practice in order to keep her engaged, which is why she enjoys teaching the yoga fusion class. She likes having the option to do modifications that allow her to access the practice she needs each day.

Julia explained that a key to sustaining her practice was that she did not put pressure on herself to practice:

I didn’t say like, ‘You have to do it four times this week,’ which I might have done in the past, and then not achieved that goal and then gotten mad at myself. I really approached it as like, oh, I’m going to take that time and go up and see what I can find and see if there’s a video I like, and I’ll just do it. And it might be five minutes, it may be 20 minutes, whatever. I’m just going to do it. And I think, somehow, that worked for me.

For the participants of this study, sustaining a yoga practice was not something about which they were concerned; they simply needed to keep the correct measures in place. Many of the mothers talked about the importance of communication with their partners and children so that they could have dedicated time for their practice. For others,
being present at home meant shifting their practice to their work environment. Some women also needed to maintain a particular mindset to keep themselves on track with their practice.

Connections Between Yoga Practice and Professional Experiences

All 10 participants articulated connections between their yoga practice and their professional experiences. Several themes emerged from the mothers’ narratives. All participants discussed at least one way in which their yoga practice challenged or shifted their mindset in relation to their work or provided them with a different perspective. Most participants also offered examples of interactions with students that were enhanced or impacted due to what they learned from their yoga practice. Several women talked about how they utilize elements of their yoga practice in stressful situations at work and in relation to their leadership. Participants also shared how they directly teach or incorporate yoga into their work with students and colleagues.

Changed or Challenged Mindset

One of the most consistent ways in which participants demonstrated how their yoga practice influenced their professional experiences was through reflections on how their practice changed or challenged their mindset within their work contexts. Often, this happened by the women observing an element of their practice or reflecting on a concept they learned from their yoga practice which they saw play out in a different way in their work as a student affairs educator. The main subthemes the women articulated regarding a change in mindset related to giving themselves grace; setting limits and taking breaks; and unlocking creativity, clarity, and a change in perspective related to their work.

Giving Grace
Betty, Charlotte, Clara, and Nina all spoke about how they translate what they learn in their yoga practice into giving themselves grace and permission to focus on what they are capable of doing that day. Betty shared that she tries to carry the mindfulness, presence, and intention that she cultivates through her yoga practice into her daily interactions. She has learned from her practice that “part of being able to show up on the mat means that you have to show up in other areas…in your life or at work…in order to feel like I’m authentically practicing.” She clarified that in a typical asana practice there are poses that are offered but as a yoga practitioner, you do not necessarily have to do them and can do what is best for you that day. Betty carried this into her work setting by talking about how she tries to focus on giving herself the same permission to do what she needs to do that day, even if there were different expectations that she or others had.

Charlotte had a similar experience, sharing that her yoga practice got her out of “dualistic thinking…into more of this space of, you know, today this was the mom that I was, and this was the employee that I was, and tomorrow is going to be different.” Clara mentioned that yoga helps “calm [her] inner critic.” During a recent yoga practice, she realized she had overreacted to situation at work, but she also acknowledged, “I do need to be kinder to myself.” Nina also noted there are times within her own practice when she feels frustrated with her body because she could not achieve a pose she could do last week, or her balance is really off. She said, “[I] just have to remind myself that every day is different…that also applies to me [at work] and just to give myself some grace.”

Additionally, Clara talked about how yoga helps her in situations where she might have low confidence:
If I have something coming up that I know is going to be difficult for me, then I will, I’ll do yoga like in the morning, and I will think about that event, and identify some of the, some of my strengths. And then in that event, then I can rely on what I’ve already prepared during my yoga practice and repeat it to myself.

**Limits and Breaks**

Charlotte, Julia, Nina, and Rio all reflected on the importance of setting limits with work or taking breaks throughout the day. Charlotte talked about the difficulty of boiling down her work into numbers for an annual report she needed to complete, which she said is anxiety-producing for her, but she also noted that she tends to just try to “push through” to get it completed. She said,

I tend to forget that if I take a little bit of time to get to the mat or to take some space away from the [to-do] list, the list is clarified…I’m able to prioritize. I’m able to see what’s important and what’s not.

Julia described a recent experience when a student scheduled an appointment with her and failed to attend the meeting, so she used that time to step away from her to-do list:

I think that traditionally, my reaction after that would have been, well great, I have half an hour to catch up on emails or do all the other things that are on my to-do list…and my to-do list was crazy long that day and I had a million things to do around the house as well. But fortunately, I did have that moment of clarity, where I kind of looked around and said, ‘Okay, what is that best thing that I could do for myself right now? What is the thing, what is the priority right now?’ And I think usually that priority would have been something on the list, but fortunately
in that moment I looked at that list, I looked at the house, and all the things I had
to do, and I thought, all of these things will be better if I take 20 minutes for
myself first.

Nina explained that her yoga practice also reminds her to take breaks in the
workday. She said,

In yoga, you know, we are always like, “If you need a break, take one.” Right,
like if you need to stop doing that pose, don’t do that pose anymore, take a break
from it. …So, in my work, you know, I was never really doing that much. Right,
like we normally don’t, you know, we work through our lunches…we bring
laptops home with us, you know, in the evenings, and don’t really build in that
time for breaks.

Rio shared that her yoga practice also helped her to be mindful of when she was
pushing herself too much in her work. She explained that she unexpectedly had to adjust
her schedule temporarily to accommodate her family’s varying schedules after an
accident. She said,

I felt bad because I was coming in late, I was leaving a little early, so I was having
that negotiation of that work, like oh, I’ll just work through lunch…I need to do
something to support my team members. And just feeling that need to
overcompensate and do more for everyone else, and I think that worked for
maybe a day or two, and I think I hit that wall of, you know, sitting like, writing
an email, and eating my lunch at my desk and realizing like, this is not tenable.
Like, you can’t serve others if you don’t serve yourself first.
Rio recognized that having limits at work is not a negative thing and often helps her to better engage with colleagues and students.

**Creativity and Clarity**

Many participants commented on how their yoga practice allowed them to tap into creativity, gain clarity about certain work situations, or view work from a different perspective. Clara indicated she turns to yoga when she feels like she is struggling creatively with programming ideas. Clara specifically discussed her experience when she was pregnant with her second child and she was receiving more responsibility at work. She began expanding her yoga practice at this time, and she said, “It’s like the strength of my body like, transfers over to like, the strength of my mind,” suggesting that her expanded yoga practice helped with her creativity for her work.

Similar to Clara, Rio said her yoga practice also helps her with certain work tasks where she feels stuck. She said,

Especially when I feel the most amount of stress and those kinds of things where I have to really think very differently from what I would normally do, that’s where for me movement is the most important, whether it’s doing yoga or running or walking. I think, like I said earlier, because you’re focused on moving your body, your mind works differently. But what I like about yoga is that…especially when we worked on the grant, I had my notepaper out because then I knew when that light bulb moment hit…I could stop and write it down and it wasn’t obtrusive to the practice…I feel like that’s when I have those, usually they’re better ideas.

Sawyer’s practice also allows her to gain clarity about her work and think about things differently. She explained,
I think definitely there have been lots of times where I’m in the middle of practice and I’m like, “Oh, this makes way more sense to do something differently,” not necessarily because of the practice, but because of that shower moment space. Time to process it without an email popping up or a phone call, or you know, someone walking in the office.

In these instances, the participants all turned to their practice to work out something that was stuck on their mind, and their practice helped them shift their mindset to a different place to access the creativity and clarity they desired.

**New Perspectives**

Charlotte, Delaney, and Julia all referenced different ways in which their practices allowed them to see an element of their work from a different perspective. Charlotte reflected about her interactions with one of her direct reports:

He likes a lot of context. He likes a lot of administrative contact, you know, he likes weekly one-on-ones, he likes a very structured environment. And I think I’ve been probably coming to his aid a little too quickly. And so, noticing this about my supervision style this past year, you know, the problem tends to solve itself if I don’t get back to him right away because he figures it out…if I just give it a little bit of space. So sometimes the to-do list, the situation solves itself if I’m not so on top of it.

Charlotte expanded, sharing that her therapist would always talk to her about space, and she did not understand what she meant by it until she started understanding it in relation to her yoga practice. She referenced how engaging with physical postures helps her
identify and feel where she needs more physical space in her body and felt this same concept in a metaphorical sense in her work related to this colleague.

Delaney described a recent experience during her yoga practice where she had worn shorts instead of yoga pants and was able to hold *vrikshasana* (tree pose) for much longer than she typically could. She realized that her yoga pants are usually too slippery for her to be able to do this. Upon reflection, Delaney said,

What you could take away from that is, you know, when you’re trying to work through a problem or an issue, you know, think about it…from a different lens, right, or change, change something up so you can get out of your routine and your rut and rethink things, right. We always just keep doing things the same way and we maybe don’t think about it from a different perspective.

Julia reflected on her practice and shared, “Yoga teaches you about the small, small incremental steps.” She expanded,

Maybe I push this a little bit more or I try this posture I haven’t been able to do before. Or I just, you know, see if I can stretch that little bit further. [But] I am seeing some pretty big steps long-term, right? And I think that does apply to mindfulness or other practices that you’re taking off the mat. It really helps you to just see how you can very slowly, without pressure, without putting a lot of pressure on yourself, to just make these little changes.

Julia explained this connected to her work by saying,

Anytime I have a difficult project that I’m not sure how to tackle, or challenging appointment that I’m not really thrilled to be diving into, I would say that is very helpful, that piece-by-piece, how can I break this down, how could I tackle part of
this today? What would be, you know, a starting point that I can manage and then
I can move on to the next piece.

In these examples, the women drew a connection between a specific concept from their
practice to these particular work situations.

**Enhanced Student Support**

Many of the student affairs mothers articulated ways in which their yoga practice
has improved their work with students. Specifically, they noted their capacity to engage
in deeper and more meaningful conversations with students. Several participants were
also more inclined to check in on students’ wellness and make recommendations to
improve their self-care habits by sharing about their own wellness journeys.

**Meaningful Connection**

Veradis, Charlotte, Julia, and Nina all reflected on ways in which their yoga
practice helped them have more meaningful connections with students. Veradis shared
that she interacts with an online community of yoga practitioners through a yoga channel
online and was not expecting to feel the level of connection she has had with others
through that experience. She reflected on this related to her work environment by saying,

I think it can help us be more aware of the impact that we can have on one another
even if we’re not in the same physical space. Whether that’s with a student that’s,
you know, fully online that…I have no opportunity to interact with in a physical
way, or just someone who happens to choose to do a remote appointment because
it fits into their life. You know, I can, I can connect in just as much of a real and
deep fashion in that way.
Charlotte said her yoga practice reminds her to be mindful before entering meetings that revolve around difficult experiences like a sexual assault or complex mental health concerns. She usually takes a moment to adjust how she wants to show up in that space given what she knows about the situation. Julia shared a specific example of when she paused before having a meeting with a student to reflect on how she wanted to approach the conversation. She had a meeting scheduled with a student who had failed all of his courses that term, including one she taught. Before going into that appointment, Julia prepared by thinking about how she could really listen to the student. She thought about going into the meeting being super kind, asking how she could support the student, and giving them space to talk about what was on their mind. Julia felt like the conversation was excellent and that she was able to really connect with the student.

Nina discussed the often transactional nature of advising appointments:

In advising, my conversations with students can be very transactional sometimes, and it also just helps me think about, you know, some of the deeper things that I could get into the student if it’s appropriate, you know, and asking them to say more about something that we’re talking about instead of, okay, great, you know, check this box, here you go, see you later.

Nina said her role as a yoga fusion instructor also helps her remember that there is often a lot of information she does not know about students. She shared,

Sometimes I have to stop myself from just saying, “Nope, sorry, this is the policy, this is the deadline, it’s firm”…What else is happening? [Are] there any extenuating circumstances that I don’t know about? And maybe not necessarily from my own yoga practice, but from…a yoga instructor standpoint, there is
always so much information about that student in my class, my participants, that I
do not know…I always try to teach to the people in front of me and I try to make
sure that shows up in my day-to-day with students, too.

Nina shared that her experience as a yoga fusion instructor has also helped her be
more receptive to meeting with difficult students. She explained, “Sometimes poses that I
don’t like feel really good and other people’s bodies so I’m still going to teach it and I’m
not going to purposefully not put it in there just because I don’t like it.” She equated that
with her work experience by saying,

There are some meetings or some students when their names get up on your
calendar and you’re like “Oh, not this one”…like maybe there were difficulties
with this individual in the past. …I think that I try to remind myself to be present
in that moment, and say that, you know, whatever history I have doesn’t matter.
You know, it’s just all about what they need from me today and how I can work
with them.

Veradis reflected on a recent yoga practice where she was contemplating the
notion of surrender:

Rather than throwing your hand up and saying, “I don’t have any, any influence
on this,” [when] it feels like sometimes surrender can have that connotation of
like skepticism, or “Why does it matter, I’m just going to give up,”…I really flip
the page on that and just say like, that act of surrender is kind of that ultimate
giving yourself grace.

Related to her work, Veradis shared,
In our advising practice, there are points, and on a regular basis, where we function on a drop-in basis, so kind of the intent is to…take care of that immediate concern in a short amount of time and move on to the next person. And I take a lot of pride in trying to meet folks where they are and, and really see them.

Veradis explained sometimes this means giving students the full time they need, taking responsibility for that choice with the next student, and ensuring them that they will also have the same consideration and opportunity as the prior student.

**Check-Ins About Student Wellness**

Delaney, Veradis, and Julia mentioned how their yoga practice makes them more likely to check in on students’ wellness and ask deeper questions when a student makes a concerning comment. Delaney noted that in the last 10 years or so, which roughly correlates with when she started her yoga practice, she has made a shift in how she approaches conversations with students because of her own focus on wellbeing. She shared,

I really try to make a practice of, when I meet with a student, not saying, you know, what’s your major, where’re you from? One of my favorite lines to say is, “What do you do to…practice self-care?” And sometimes they look at me like, “Wow, why are you asking me that?” You know. Because I think I’m trying to send the message that, um, yes, you have obligations here as a student, right, to do well. But part of that is how you’re taking care of yourself.

Veradis talked about how part of her role as an advisor, supervisor, and colleague is to talk holistically with people, which means sharing things that she does for self-care
when appropriate. She said, “If someone says, ‘I’m feeling really stressed,’ or ‘I’m feeling really anxious,’ taking the time to ask ‘What’s the root of that? And how do you listen to those cues, and you know, what’s in your self-care toolbox?’”

Julia talked about meeting with students who bring up their stress, depression, or anxiety. She shared,

Previously, those conversations used to make me a little bit uncomfortable, and I wasn’t quite sure how to handle some of those. And I do think that yoga just makes me a little bit more willing to say simple things like, “I’m really sorry to hear that,” or, “Would you like to talk about that,” or, you know, “How can I help you with this situation?”

Julia provided a specific example where this approach was impactful:

I am finding that my own wellness journey is really helpful in those conversations. And I actually just had an appointment like that yesterday…afterwards, I was like, oh, I didn’t really mean to talk about yoga in this appointment but wow, that really made so much sense. Because I had a student who was really struggling and he was talking about his previous experience with therapy and he started talking about mindfulness, and we had a really great, very natural conversation about what he could be implementing. I talked briefly about my yoga practice, and we talked about just overall wellbeing, and I don’t think I would have had the tools to have that conversation 18 months ago.
For these three women, seeing the benefits of their own wellness journey through yoga helped them navigate conversations with students which encouraged their own contemplation about their self-care.

**Stress Management Using Breathwork**

All of the participants mentioned using *pranayama* (breathwork) to manage stressful situations at work. Clara simply mentioned turning to deep breathing during stressful situations at work, while Rio described breathwork as “the most important part” of how she connects her yoga practice to her professional experience. She shared,

It’s also probably the number one advice I give my students, because I feel that it’s, we all sometimes just need a moment, whether it’s to reflect or calm down or think. We take that breath before we say something good or bad…Breathing in just gives me a moment to actually stop before I may, before I react and that’s just something that I’ve come to learn and realize about myself. So, it is a mechanism I employ every day, through like almost any situation.

Some women spoke about their interactions with people or their participation in meetings. Betty talked about a colleague that she has to meet with frequently who “is not a very mindful…person and has a super strong personality,” so she regularly uses breathwork in their meetings to be mindful of her own emotions and reactions in the moment. Julia shared, “I do some deep breathing with my mute on in a Zoom team meeting that’s going awry.” She also engages in deep breathing after difficult student appointments or meetings that are stressful.

Sawyer mentioned an experience of working with “a particularly frustrating lawyer” who had accused her of engaging in racial and gender discrimination. When she
knew she had meetings scheduled with him, she “really had to work on like, taking that long breath, and thinking through how to respond and, yeah, not getting as flustered as he wanted me to be.” Sawyer also discussed how breathwork helps her to better engage with students:

The natural thing for people is to kind of match people’s tone and volume, right. But in conduct what you should be doing is kind of bringing them back down. …Taking those breaths really helped to do that, right. Like those pauses, those whatever, because it’s likely that you’re going to be frustrated with whatever they’re saying.

Nina said that in stressful situations, particularly when interacting with angry parents or on long days in August as she prepares for the start of the academic year, she will turn to breathing exercises to help her get through those moments.

Maeve turns to breathing exercises if she experiences racing thoughts or anxiety about what is being shared in a conversation. In a prior role in which she was responsible for large events, she and a colleague would find an empty room, lock the door, turn off the lights, and complete a 10-to-15-minute meditation together to ease some of the anxiety and pressure she felt before the event. Charlotte also talked about how she will use held nostril breathing if she starts “noticing that things are kind of getting out of control.”

Delaney referenced feeling anxious at work and using her yogic breathing to recenter herself. She tends to do a lot of deep breathing before any presentation she has to provide where the stakes are high. She also uses it when she finds herself getting angry, frustrated, or on the verge of saying something she might regret. Veradis noted having a
breathwork practice allows her to notice when she is breathing in a shallow way due to a specific situation or just a busy day. She shared, “Slowing down and taking a breath helps me come into a more calm demeanor to be able to focus on the task at hand, instead of all the monkey mind of the other things swirling around me.”

In all of these examples, the student affairs mothers turned to their breathwork in difficult situations to help regulate their mind and emotions and bring them back to the purpose or intent of the interaction.

**Leadership Practices**

Two student affairs mothers, Delaney and Veradis, reflected on how their yoga practice has influenced their leadership as women in student affairs. Delaney believes her yoga practice shows up in the way she leads. She shared,

Developer is one of my strengths…I think that’s connected with yoga. It’s about, kind of, community and sharing and having grace with others…and being caring. You know, I can’t increase the salary of most of my employees, I can’t get them to probably where they should be, but…I strongly encourage my staff to take their vacation.

Delaney said that prior to her arrival there was a philosophy of constant overwork and because of budget concerns, there has been a fear among employees that they are going to get terminated.

Delaney also said that when she meets with people, she starts the conversation by centering the person and asking how they care for themselves or how their family is doing. She believes this ties to the philosophies and tenants of yoga. Delaney further connected her practice to her work:
I think it’s how I approach my work and how I convey to those around me what I value. And how I hope they will lead. That they lead with care and concern. And you know, that being perfectionist and hard chargers all the time, is not the best approach always. Right? Again, I fully appreciate there are times in our job where the stakes are higher and we have to go harder, but that you balance that out in a way, because if you don’t, I don’t think there’s ever time for really true reflection and thoughtfulness when you’re just driven by your to-do list and hard charging. Yoga creates a space for clarity, for, you know, reimagining, for thinking about things differently.

Delaney said at this point in her career, yoga has adjusted her priorities. She explained,

I prioritize finding balance in my life versus building my résumé. I’m quite satisfied with what I’ve been able to achieve professionally…You know, people will ask me, “What will [you] do next? Do you want to be a college president?” No. You know, I think part of that is the grounding that a yoga practice does. It…reminds you that your time on this earth is limited, and how do you want to use your time on this earth?

Veradis talked about how her yoga practice allows her to be fully present with her staff members when they have had to share news with her about a move or job offer. In those conversations, she will usually tell the person she’s going to try to give them her full attention and not focus on what the news could mean for her or the team. She tells them, “I have a choice about where that attention goes…I want to put my attention on
you and supporting you and be excited for you, and I have control over that reaction.”

Veradis also shared,

Something I incorporate working with students or colleagues, or even in our freshman seminar course that we teach, is you know, creating a space where you can acknowledge and show up where you are in that moment. And so, if we have an agenda for a one-on-one and somebody shows up and has a frustration or an excitement or whatever, I think it’s really important to honor that. And so, I’m happy to set my agenda aside and, and if it’s something critical we’ll work our way back to it, and maybe it’s another time, maybe it’s that day but you know, honoring, you know, how you showed up today…Being present to what, what shows up is, is something that I’ve kind of absorbed and carry with me.

Veradis explained that this type of presence and honoring how people show up is something she grasped from her yoga practice.

She also reflected on the impact of a traditional close of a yoga practice:

When you think about the close of a yoga practice, you know…“the best and brightest in me honors the best and brightest of you,” I think that just reminds me…of the power of acknowledging those, those bright spots that people share, you know. So, sharing words of appreciation or acknowledging when someone has an impact on you, I think that goes a long way. So, I think that’s another, you know, as a supervisor, as a leader, you know, as a woman trying to support other women, that’s something I try to, I feel like yoga has impacted as well.

In these narratives, Delaney and Veradis demonstrate how their yoga practice has deeply influenced the ways in which they feel a responsibility to connect with and care for
colleagues with whom they work. They challenge the traditional expectations of what the work should look like by incorporating elements of compassion and appreciation.

**Direct Application of Yoga**

Several student affairs mothers shared that they directly incorporate yoga practices in their work with students and colleagues. After understanding the benefits of the practice, they felt it was important to share it with others. Betty most directly utilized yoga in her work through offering a trauma-informed yoga nidra class on her campus. Betty reflected on how the class only takes place during the academic year. Since it was not offered during the summer, she personally realized how not having that practice “feels like an absence in a way that it hasn’t before.” She began to consider the impact that not continuing the practice over the summer could have on survivors who typically attend and shared that it had her thinking about offering the class year-round. She explained that during the earlier stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the instructor offered it virtually, which is what could happen over the summer months.

Betty also incorporates breathing, body scans, and mindfulness practices in the trainings and workshops she offers students around intimacy and healthy relationships, all of which stem from her yoga practice. She often engages in deep breathing when she is working with a survivor of gender-based violence so that the survivor will start mirroring that breathing as well.

Betty has worked with her yoga nidra instructor to offer a self-care session for the division of student affairs. She said yoga “has shaped like, the way that…I’m professionally like viewed by colleagues.” Since she has this focus on wellness in her
work, she found herself leading a group for student affairs moms once a month that allows women with similar-aged kids to connect, share advice, and reflect on their work.

Clara shared that yoga is also a part of her job in wellness programming. She tries to “encourage people to use it as a really, stress prevention tool for…faculty and staff and students.” Clara said first-year students receive resources for free online yoga practices and she also facilitates programs in the residence halls related to meditation and deep breathing. She provides wellness programming for faculty and staff but because of a lack of budget, this has been limited to sharing resources about yoga and other wellness activities.

Several other women either made recommendations to add yoga as a wellness activity for staff at their institution or introduced yoga to their own teams in meetings. Rio said that at a previous institution she served on staff council and made a recommendation to offer a yoga class as part of a wellness initiative in January. They identified a faculty member who was a yoga instructor to lead this, and the event turned into a biweekly group in the faculty/staff gym on campus. Delaney has led her staff in breathing exercises and an online video of office yoga, Maeve engaged some of her coworkers with desk or chair yoga soon after she started her current position as a way to bond with them, and Sawyer said she has incorporated chair yoga practices with her staff during their professional development portion of their weekly staff meeting.

The women in this study identified many ways in which their yoga practice influenced their professional experiences as student affairs educators and mothers. The participants shared ways in which they translated lessons learned on the yoga mat to their work environments. Many of the women also identified how their yoga practice directly
enhanced their interactions with students. All of them commented on the application of breathwork to manage stressful situations at work. Several also reflected on yoga’s influence on their leadership and others also discussed how they have incorporated yoga practice directly in their work with students or colleagues.

**Whiteness and Yoga**

All of the participants of this study identified as White women, and very few made unprompted connections between their whiteness in relation to their yoga practice. Before the conclusion of the second interview with each participant, I informed the women that many of the participants in this study identified as White on the demographic form but speaking about this racial identity did not come up organically in my first interview with most participants. I then asked them, “Is there anything you’d like to share about your identity as a White student affairs mother who practices yoga?” When asked this question directly, most of the participants had some reflection to offer. Responses included sharing specific examples when they questioned their involvement with yoga; reflecting on their engagement with diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations; contemplating the accessibility of yoga as a wellness practice for people of color; and considering the need to decolonize yoga in Western society.

Betty and Maeve shared specific experiences involving people of color that made them think more deeply about their involvement with yoga as a White woman. Betty reflected on her identity as a White student affairs mother and said, “It does feel like there is like, this privilege involved, right, in being a White student affairs mother where you’re allowed to like, self-care.” Betty expanded by talking about how a professional development committee at her institution had been sending out a Wellness Wednesday
email with different wellness tips and staff of color explained to the committee that they are not okay, and the emails are insulting. She went on to say,

My observations are that our colleagues of color, particularly right now, are…experiencing trauma in different ways. …And I wonder like, given the historical context and the stereotypes and biases and racism in our country if right, like, women of color are given that same…permission to take that time for themselves.

Maeve disclosed that when she first began practicing yoga, she did not think about the cultural roots of the practice. She shared that over time, she began to understand appropriation and how it applied to the context of yoga in U.S. culture, and she has done reflection on how “the actual practice of yoga itself can be done by anyone…but I need to be mindful of like, I’m not taking…it for granted…so there’s been that like, trying to find where is that balance.” Maeve shared an example of how a former colleague of hers who is South Asian shared an article on social media about different types of mainstream yoga, which included a goat yoga practice, and the colleague shared her perspective about the harm of those kinds of practices. Maeve said that was not something she had thought about before, and it helped her continue to think about her own engagement with yoga.

Julia indicated her recommitment to her yoga practice is coinciding with “a pretty big dedication to diversity, equity, inclusion work.” She explained that her yoga practice has given her the “ability to slow down, to listen to other people, to connect, to be open to hearing people’s experiences.” She said that she recently participated in a racial healing
book group at work and that her yoga practice helped her participate in that experience. She shared,

As a result of yoga and being more mindful and maybe taking more time to reflect, I would say that has allowed for more meaningful conversations, more heartfelt conversations, difficult conversations that I would have probably avoided in the past.

In a similar vein, Sawyer shared that her yoga practice provides her with an introspective space to think through current events in the world, most recently high-profile cases where Black men have been killed by police officers. Her reflections have resulted in conversations with her wife about how they want to talk to their children about race and police.

Nina and Delaney both engaged in reflective questioning about the accessibility of yoga to people of color within their own communities. Nina shared that she has thought about [The] criticisms of the middle- to upper-socioeconomic class, White women practicing this. You know, some of those cultural appropriation, you know, critiques of who does yoga and who should do yoga and how, how are you doing it and who are you doing it with, and where did it come from. And some of that critique crosses my mind every once in a while.

She went on to share that “practicing yoga is not a bad thing, it doesn’t make you a bad person,” but acknowledged that “sometimes there aren’t enough conversations around some of those concerns,” which she said even occurs within her own fitness community. She said,
I think we need to recognize it and to think, you know, do we have a representation problem in our yoga communities, or is it in our group fitness communities in general? Yeah, I definitely see it in mine, is that we don’t have a lot of people of color. We’re mostly White women…And are we putting up barriers in place that would make anybody else that doesn’t identify that way feel uncomfortable being there?

Delaney noted that she is aware of her “middle class white privilege every day.” She reflected on her own yoga practice in community settings and then turned her focus to the accessibility of the practice for students of color. She said,

I’ll be honest, I can’t think of a time when I’ve done yoga in community, other than maybe here at [my institution] where I wasn’t doing it with just White women, typically, kind of middle-aged like me. You know, so I think that makes me think about how accessible…you know, something like yoga should be very accessible. I mean, there’s so many online resources…you know, I guess I’m just kind of having a little a-ha moment here. You know, I have a really unique opportunity to help other communities, Brown, Black students, you know, maybe see the benefits of yoga…Our population here is about 50% students of color and I don’t think, you know, beyond some offerings at the rec we make it very accessible to students.

Delaney was the only participant to verbally express her ability to use her positionality within her institution to actually make a change related to the accessibility of yoga.

Veradis expressed a similar awareness as Delaney regarding the presence of other White women as she navigates the world. She observed,
You know, I think, in some ways, there’s a lot of privilege in knowing that I will encounter others who present in the same way that I do, whether it’s in the workplace, whether it’s, you know, when I’m picking up my kids at school, whether it’s in a yoga class, I can, I can expect to see other White women.

She also aspired to create spaces where people can be their authentic selves due to the influence of her practice. She remarked,

I know in the yoga community there is a lot of conversation about limited access or limited awareness of the benefits of practice for folks of diverse backgrounds. And I think, I think my yoga practice has helped me harness the value I find in presenting authentically and being true to myself and hopefully that helps me cultivate a space for others to be able to do that as well.

Betty and Charlotte both specifically commented on the need to decolonize yoga in the United States. Betty acknowledged that yoga has been “hijacked by White women…and like there is not like the recognition or connection to like some of the roots of yoga.” Charlotte also talked about the considerations she has had with decolonizing yoga:

I’ve really been kind of taking a look at this…idea of colonization and whitewashing the yoga, kind of, community and so trying to be really conscious of the roots of where yoga has come from. So, trying to understand more Ayurveda, trying to understand more, to honor the roots of the practice…trying to understand and use the correct terminology, you know, figure out more the origins of the practice, have been important to me. Following and doing classes of
women of color have been important to me. Doing classes of a plus-size woman has been important.

Overall, most of the student affairs mothers discussed a variety of ways in which they were reflecting on their identity as a White woman who practices yoga and has heard about conversations in the yoga community related to accessibility and decolonizing practices. However, very few commented on ways in which they were actively engaged in decolonizing practices.

**Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the common themes I identified among the narratives of 10 student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice. Each woman shared their personal and professional background, disclosed information about their life story as it related to their identities as women and mothers and described their journey into motherhood. Many of the participants faced challenges that impacted them in the workplace, such as seeing a lack of representation of women in leadership, mental health diagnoses, pregnancy and infant loss and infertility, and being questioned about their capacity as a student affairs mother. The women also noted specific experiences which caused them to pay more attention to their wellness as student affairs mothers, which established or strengthened their yoga practice.

Each participant approached her yoga practice in a unique way, with different styles of yoga, instructional methods, and locations for practice represented among their narratives. All of the women commented on what compels them to engage in yoga as a wellness practice, and they described the physical and mental benefits of their practice. The women also relied on communication with partners and children, practicing at work,
and having a particular mindset to maintain their yoga practice. Finally, all of the student affairs mothers articulated ways in which their yoga practice influenced their professional experiences, ranging from challenging their mindset about certain work situations to improving their interactions with students.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This narrative inquiry study centered the perspectives of student affairs educators who are mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice. It offers a counternarrative to existing literature by demonstrating how student affairs mothers successfully integrate a wellness practice into their lives. It also shows how engaged pedagogy can be integrated into student affairs work to make strides toward meeting competencies set by ACPA and NASPA for student affairs educators.

This chapter summarizes this study, including the problem statement, the study’s purpose and research questions, the review of the literature, the methods used for the study, and the results. I then turn to an analysis of results, which examines the results shared in Chapter IV in connection with existing literature and theoretical frameworks and offers a critique of higher education as it relates to the professional experiences of White student affairs mothers who participated in this study. Finally, I offer suggestions for professional practice and future research based on the findings of this study and offer concluding thoughts.

Summary of the Study

In the Personal and Ethical Foundations competency for student affairs educators, ACPA and NASPA (2015) highlighted the importance of healthy habits, stress-management, building healthy relationships, and engaging in thoughtful reflection. However, a widespread culture to engage in this type of self-care or holistic wellness
behavior is not engrained in student affairs work. The purpose of this feminist narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the life stories of student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice?
2. What compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga as a wellness practice?
3. How do student affairs mothers sustain a yoga practice?
4. What connections, if any, do student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences?

The literature review established a foundation for the study and demonstrated a need for further research related to student affairs mothers and the influence of wellness practices on professional experiences. Feminist standpoint theory and the theory of gendered organizations grounded this study. Additional research focused on a summary of motherhood in the United States; women’s representation in higher education and challenges, successes, and internal struggles that student affairs mothers face; yoga as a wellness practice, its history and problems in Western society, and its benefits; and three engaged pedagogies in higher education that stem from bell hooks’s engaged pedagogy.

I recruited participants through the Student Affairs Moms (S.A.M.S.) Facebook group, the Fit S.A.M.S Facebook group, and a NASPA Womxn in Student Affairs (WISA) Knowledge Community monthly email update. Subsequently, I identified 10 White student affairs mothers who engaged in an introductory meeting with me, followed by two semi-structured interviews with four weeks of online reflective journal prompt
completion between them. After all interviews and journal entries were transcribed, I
used the paradigmatic mode of analysis to identify common themes found in the
participants’ narratives, which developed the themes identified related to the life stories
of student affairs mothers, reasons for engaging in yoga as a wellness practice, sustaining
a yoga practice, connections made between their yoga practice and professional
experiences, and whiteness and yoga. In the next section in this chapter, I provide an
analysis of the results reviewed in Chapter IV.

Analysis of Results

Within this section, I connect existing literature with the results of this study and
offer an analysis of how these results relate to the patriarchal, gendered organizations that
are institutions of higher education. I specifically analyze the life stories of student affairs
mothers, reasons for engaging in yoga as a wellness practice, sustaining a yoga practice,
connections between yoga and professional experiences, and whiteness and yoga as
presented in the previous chapter.

Life Stories of Student Affairs Mothers

Feminist standpoint theory situates knowledge in a woman’s own experience
where emotions, attitudes, interests, and values impact the interpretation of events
(Anderson, 2020). This narrative inquiry study resulted in the creation of new knowledge
about student affairs mothers’ experiences within their professional role, while also
asking them to reflect on how they see their yoga practice influencing their work. Within
the results of this study, this theoretical perspective was more prominent than Collins’
(2000) later work regarding standpoint epistemology, which focused on the
epistemological standpoint of Black women and acknowledged that a variety of statuses
intersect to create one’s standpoint. Not only did all of the participants in this study identify as White, but few of them discussed social identities beyond the scope of their gender identity and race, even when prompted. Although a few women shared other institutionally oppressed identities such as their sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and religion/spirituality, they did not make explicit connections between these identities and their yoga practice or professional experiences. The lack of unprompted discussion around identities, including that of whiteness, was a pattern that emerged in the data that is addressed in a future section of this chapter.

**Understanding Identity as a Woman in Student Affairs**

For nearly all of the participants of this study, their identity as a woman in student affairs became salient to them when they began to realize the dearth of women’s representation in upper-level positions of leadership in student affairs or across the institution. Some of the women came to this realization while they were in their master’s program, while others began to notice it more in their professional roles. For example, Julia said she began to think about her identity as a woman more after she had two daughters because she began to think about women’s roles within the world more. She commented how,

if you get a group of people in our office together or our broader, kind of, peers on campus, into a room, you look around the room and it’s a bunch of women. But then you look up into leadership roles and that starts to change. And that, I think, has, these are all things that are slowly percolating over the years.

For many of the women, this percolating thought regarding representation seemed to stick with them as they progressed in their careers or made career decisions.
Unfortunately, this finding also aligns with existing literature that indicates representation of women is lower in executive, higher-paying higher education administration roles (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017).

Additionally, half of the participants reported paying more attention to their identity as a woman because they recognized the disparate impact or expectation of work placed upon them because of their identity as a woman, such as receiving extra work, feeling unable to speak up, and being left out of conversations and meetings that could help lead toward professional advancement. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which shows that mid-level women took on additional responsibilities (Vasquez, 2012), experienced stereotypes (Vasquez, 2012), and were overlooked and dismissed at meetings (Lee, 2015).

Despite this reality, four women talked about the importance of illuminating the leadership path for other women. They discussed showing what it is like to balance professional life and motherhood, participating in a mentorship program for women, being a role model to other women, and considering how they can change their leadership style and challenge institutional policies that prevent women from feeling supported as working mothers. Modeling healthy work-life balance (Collins, 2009; Courtney, 2014; Supple, 2007) and making workplaces better for those coming behind them (Nobbe & Manning, 1997) are actions that are consistent with several studies.

At the same time, these women chose to or were at least considering how to use their positionality within their institutions as student affairs mothers to serve as mentors and role models for other women, which begins to challenge what existing literature found about the scarcity of these examples in higher education (Collins, 2009; Nobbe & Manning, 1997).
Manning, 1997; Supple, 2007). Delaney, who was the senior-most participant by title, felt a strong obligation to be a role model and mentor to other women on her staff, and articulated the importance of having her voice heard:

I feel like my role as a woman is as salient now as it’s ever been in my career, partially because I’m in student affairs and I’m a woman and [on] our cabinet, I’m only one of two women. There’s eight people in the cabinet…so I feel like I have to work a little extra hard to have my voice heard.

Despite this interest in serving as mentors and role models for other women, it is discouraging that these women student affairs professionals began to pay attention to their identity as women due to negative realities of the profession rather than positive ones that empower them as women and potential leaders in student affairs. These findings demonstrate that Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organizations, which describes a division of labor and interactions between and among men and women that create dominance and submission, remains very relevant in today’s higher education environments for women professionals. Additionally, the lack of women’s representation in leadership, feeling personal impact in their professional role, and the need to illuminate a leadership path for other women are all concerns that women of color likely confront in the workplace in even higher rates than the women in this study, which is worthy of consideration in future research.

The Journey into Motherhood

Narratives of the journey into motherhood for student affairs mothers are not well documented in existing literature. In this study, the participants described their journey into motherhood, particularly as it related to their roles as student affairs educators. While
some women described a relatively smooth transition into motherhood thanks to the support of their partners, the majority of the women discussed challenges adjusting to life with a newborn or shared stories of miscarriage, infant loss, or infertility. These stories highlight women’s bifurcation of consciousness as described by Smith (1987) and Acker’s theory of gendered organizations. These women struggled with adjusting to life with a newborn, needing to go through fertility treatments, or grieving loss.

For example, Veradis shared that when she returned to work after having her children, she “had to figure out that schedule and pumping at work and those types of things.” Rio also demonstrated a bifurcation of consciousness when she explained her return from maternity leave:

I think, with all like, trying to think I could accomplish as much and putting time to pump in my schedule, like very quickly realized like, this is a lot. And then I had to start, at that point, I think I put blocks in my schedule. So, the first block I put in was a nap because I was like, whether or not you need it, you need time where you’re just quiet. And that you’re not talking to anyone, you’re trying not to think about a baby, or any of that. You just need that decompression.

Seemingly part of their mind, particularly as new mothers, was always on mothering, either in the form of yearning to be a mother or already caring for an infant. Yet, none of them indicated ways in which their work environments demonstrated an acknowledgement of these challenges, let alone offered them support through these experiences. Supple (2007) found that women who were mothers in mid- to upper-level roles in higher education felt institutional policies were unsupportive and not designed for full-time working mothers, which is consistent with the experiences of the women in this
study. The stories shared in this study indicate that higher education continues to prioritize masculine, hierarchical, and patriarchal workplace environments that expect women who are mothers to adapt to the environment rather than focusing on dismantling practices that continue to subvert women (Acker, 1990; Fotaki, 2020).

**Understanding Identity as a Mother in Student Affairs**

Similar to how they came to understand their identities as women, the majority of participants shared they began to understand their identity as a mother and student affairs educator through negative experiences like performance scrutiny from their supervisors or colleagues and being treated differently or disregarded for professional opportunities. For example, Charlotte shared,

> When I was actively growing my family there were definitely some moments of like, “Are you sure you can do this?” And it’s like yeah…I can manage all of this. And you know, one of the hardest supervisors I’ve ever had has been a woman…who was actually the same age and the same kind of family history and was also trying to grow their family.

These findings align with studies by Nobbe and Manning (1997), Vasquez (2012), and Wolfe (2015), which also point out that women felt that their job performance was under greater scrutiny after becoming mothers. Existing literature further suggests women felt extra pressure to perform at a higher standard after returning from maternity leave (Wolfe, 2015), and they reported colleagues and supervisors began to question their work (Vasquez, 2012).

Again, these findings indicate that higher education continues to prioritize masculine, hierarchical, and patriarchal workplace environments, so much so that some
women in leadership, as in the case of Charlotte’s experience, even reinforce these expectations. As Acker (1990) pointed out, “Women’s bodies…their ability to procreate and their pregnancy, breast-feeding, and child care…are suspect, stigmatized, and used as grounds for control and exclusion” (p. 152). Indeed, based on their decision to have children, these women experienced stigmatization and exclusion.

In contrast to these experiences, some women shared more positive examples of when their identity as a mother became salient to them as student affairs educators. A few women mentioned how their perspective of the students with whom they work shifted because they were attuned to the nurturing and supportive qualities of mothering and applied them to their work with students. Rio described how she was attuned to her physical needs during pregnancy and as she was pumping breastmilk for her child after returning to work. This caused her to offer students snacks and ask them questions about if they are staying hydrated or how they were feeling that day. She said when students were surprised by these check-in questions, she would frequently tell them, “Sorry, I’m a mom. I just think about those things!” These perspectives directly challenge masculine principles like competition, independence, and analytical behavior that Hughes (1989) asserted are upheld by institutions of higher education.

Two participants also commented on how becoming a mother led them to create new boundaries with work because they did not want their work content spilling into the lives of their children after hours or they had reset their priorities and deprioritized work on behalf of their children. These decisions align with Collins’ (2009) study, which noted that some women dedicated immense time and energy in the early stages of their careers but then had to later make a choice regarding work and family commitments. This
decision to set boundaries confronts the patriarchal, capitalist notion bolstered by higher education that employees should always be capable and available workers who prioritize work productivity above all else.

Summary

Overall, the results of this study indicate that institutions of higher education still operate as patriarchal, gendered organizations that seek to subvert women to men. This is evident through the participants of this study naming numerous negative experiences related to their identities as women and mothers: the lack of women in senior leadership roles; negative workplace impacts like additional work, lack of opportunity for advancement, and questioning productivity and capacity; and failure to acknowledge and support the challenges of infertility, loss, pregnancy, postpartum care, breastfeeding, childcare, and overall wellness for women employees.

In order to manage these challenges, women are forced to operate within what Smith (1987) described as a bifurcation of consciousness, wherein women are physically, mentally, and emotionally balancing work and mothering demands on an ongoing basis. As Smith (1987) indicated in her work, university environments require women to be physically present via their bodies to complete work, but the expectations surrounding work were not created with the needs of a woman’s body in mind. Many of the narratives shared by the student affairs mothers in this study highlight this concern.

Although some women identified strategies to overcome the patriarchal barriers of their work environments, such as using scheduling effectively or creating boundaries between work and family life, institutions of higher education cannot continue to rely on women to adapt to these harmful environments and ignore the needs of mothers within
their workforce. Failure to identify leadership pipelines for women, eliminate discriminatory behavior based on pregnancy or parenting status, and implement policies and support mechanisms that cater to the needs of student affairs mothers will continue to diminish the participation of these women in higher education and student affairs.

**Reasons for Engaging in Yoga as a Wellness Practice**

All of the participants in this study indicated reasons why they engage with yoga as a wellness practice. The majority of participants commented on having improved body awareness and experiencing physical benefits such as having support through pregnancy and labor, identifying how stress forms in their body, improved sleep quality, and strength and flexibility. They also cited improved mental engagement, which they described as an ability to be present in the moment, have more self-confidence, calm their anxiety, and cultivate more patience with their children. Furthermore, the women indicated their yoga practice assisted with stress management and provided them with a self-check-in that was critical to them as student affairs mothers. Many noted the positive impact their practice not only had on them personally, but also on the interactions they were able to have with their families, colleagues, and students. Veradis summed up the importance of these benefits when she said:

> I choose to engage with it…because it’s mine. Like, it’s not like I have to hit anybody else’s standard and I’m not counting reps, I’m not trying to hit a pose in a perfect way, like, it just is a lot about trusting yourself, I think, to be in the moment and explore and to keep learning about yourself.

As indicated by several studies, being a “workaholic” was no longer a desirable quality when student affairs mothers wanted to be present with their family, so
establishing better boundaries, reducing stress, and carving out personal time became a priority (Collins, 2009; Supple, 2007; Vasquez, 2012). For the student affairs mothers in this study, their yoga practice helped them achieve all of those aims as women who wanted to be present for their families. The information shared by the women in this study also aligns with existing literature that found yoga practice assisted with mindfulness development that led to less judgment and more patience in their interactions with others (Kishida et al., 2018). Other studies found that yoga practice assisted with participants’ perceived stress reduction, better emotional control, navigation of relationships, and slowing physical distress (Brems, 2015), as well as that yoga practice increased awareness of the own body, mental states, relaxation, and helped manage distractions, anxiety, focus, distress, and discomfort (Burke et al., 2016). The results of this study are consistent with this existing literature.

Based on the results of this study, it is evident that student affairs mothers who engage in yoga as a wellness practice do so for a variety of reasons. The benefits the women articulated related to their experience with yoga could be experienced by other student affairs professionals, provided that they have access to yoga practice in some way that aligns with their personal needs and identities. However, what is of further consideration related to what compels student affairs mothers to engage with yoga as a wellness practice that was not readily discussed by participants are the work conditions that create the need for them to access benefits such as improving sleep quality, identifying how stress forms in their body, having more self-confidence, calming anxiety, and managing stress. Recognizing and achieving these benefits through yoga practice is important to these women, but institutions of higher education should be questioning why
they are necessary. Work environments that continue to uphold patriarchy and subject student affairs mothers to physical and mental stress need to be challenged. This disruptive work is often done by women like the participants in this study, as is apparent through the ways in which their yoga practice influences their professional experiences.

**Sustaining a Yoga Practice**

The student affairs mothers in this study identified certain supports, decisions, and mindset needs that allow them to sustain their yoga practice. Many of the women shared it was important to have their partner’s support in sustaining their practice, which showed up most often through taking care of children while the women set aside time to practice. Within existing literature related to student affairs, women shared that their partner or spouse is a critical source of support for them (Nobbe & Manning, 1997). Partners supported working mothers by sharing responsibilities at home and helping make career decisions (Collins, 2009; Lee, 2015). Findings from this study support the critical nature of partner support and extend it to helping women maintain their personal wellness practices. Some of the participants also expressed the significance of their children understanding that they had a yoga practice or participating in yoga practice with them. Student affairs mothers wanted to set the example that mama needed time to take care of herself, or that yoga practice was a way for their children to also engage in self-care and begin to understand emotional regulation and breathing techniques.

Three women disclosed that they regularly practice yoga at work, and several others talked about practicing yoga at work in the past. Making this decision allowed these women to practice at a time of day that was most conducive to them or in the case of one participant, it was because she offered a yoga class through her work that she
chose to attend regularly as a participant. Beyond this, several of the women mentioned ways their personal mindset contributed to maintaining their yoga practice, which demonstrated that in addition to partner support and decisions about when and where to practice, it was imperative to maintain some internal drive to keep their practice going. This mindset varied among participants, but showed that minimally, the women need some opportunity to reflect on their personal needs and how those relate to their practice. Clara demonstrated this self-reflection when she said:

I think I’ve done it for long enough and I noticed the difference in myself emotionally and with my stress level when I don’t do it. And so, I’ve really just, you know, set it as a top priority for me. Because I’m a better mom, better employee…coworker, everything, when I practice regularly.

Overall, these findings show that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work when it comes to sustaining a yoga practice; there is no special formula or checklist to keep someone engaged. However, for people with children hoping to establish a yoga or other wellness practice, relying on partners, friends, or other forms of relationship and community that are present as both a source of accountability and childcare support can be helpful. Additionally, institutions of higher education offering time and space for wellness practices can assist in promoting these behaviors for employees. Having time to engage in thoughtful reflection can also help student affairs educators understand what keeps them motivated to maintain a yoga practice or other wellness activity.

**Connections Between Yoga Practice and Professional Experiences**

The results related to the connections student affairs mothers identified between their yoga practice and their professional experiences aligned with the significance of this
study. Identifying connections between yoga and professional experiences signifies potential for the workplace environment to improve, shifting from a focus on capitalistic expectations of productivity to one centered on challenging the dehumanization that can occur within higher education and replacing it with engaged, tender, heart-centered learning. Many of the connections made between yoga practice and professional experience displayed engaged pedagogy in action, as the student affairs mothers showed commitment to a growth process that promotes their own wellbeing, which in turn promoted a learning and work environment that empowered them to grow with their students and colleagues (hooks, 1994).

**Changed or Challenged Mindset**

All of the student affairs mothers discussed how their yoga practice changed or challenged their mindset in work contexts. Several women spoke about how they use lessons learned from their yoga practice to give themselves grace and permission to focus on how they can show up that day. Other women discussed how their practice encouraged them to set limits with work or take breaks throughout the day. It was important for several participants to acknowledge that, despite the pressure to push through work or continue to mark off tasks on their to-do lists, it was better for them to take time away from work so that when they did return to it, they were more engaged and better able to focus.

For example, Rio mentioned she had been focusing on accepting the things she knows she can do, rather than doing something she thinks she should do that would look good on her résumé. She said, “[I am] focusing on what I can do really well and make an impact with, rather than saying, you know… ‘Look, I can hold up 10 plates’ for like a
moment.” Rio explained, “In my practice, there is that, that comfort of knowing what, what I can do…and then what works best for me too.” Women also remarked that their yoga practice led to more clarity and creativity related to their work, and it helped them identify new perspectives connected to supervision, looking at challenges differently, and taking small steps to complete work.

Although there is not existing literature associated with how student affairs educators see connections between their yoga practice and professional experience, these results do align with prior research that suggests yoga practitioners developed self-compassion, which was especially beneficial for people who identified as perfectionists or workaholics (Kishida et al., 2018). The women in this study did not use those two terms specifically, but the narratives they shared did align with traits of perfectionism and overwork. Their stories related to challenged or changed mindsets often showed how the actions taken or realizations made by the participants as a result of their yoga practice contradicted the capitalist and patriarchal expectations of productivity, analytical thinking, competition, and aggression.

**Enhanced Student Support**

Many of the student affairs mothers articulated ways in which their yoga practice improved their work with students. Specifically, they noted their capacity to engage in deeper and more meaningful conversations with students. Student affairs mothers observed that because of their yoga practice, they were more aware of their impact on students, took time to center themselves and be mindful of how to approach difficult or sensitive conversations with students, stayed more attentive to student needs and tried not to jump ahead or fix problems, and were inclined to take as much time as they needed to
help a student rather than churn through appointments. Nina provided a clear example of this when she shared that her yoga practice helps her maintain more mindfulness when interacting with students. She said,

As I’m working with a student…sometimes it’s easy for me to have my mind kind of jump to the next question I want to ask, or the next thing I think they’re going to say, or how this is going to impact something down the road, instead of just kind of concentrating on, you know, what they’re feeling and experiencing at that time, and honoring that, instead of trying to either go straight into fixer mode, or you know, like let’s think about something else mode. And so, you know, yoga really does help me to remember that this moment is just as important as all the other things that I want to think about related to what’s happening at the time.

Several participants were also more inclined to check in on students’ wellness and make recommendations to improve their self-care habits by sharing about their own wellness journeys. They would ask students what they were doing for their own self-care and when appropriate, felt vulnerable enough to offer how their own wellness journeys have gone to give students insight into what they could engage for themselves.

The ways in which the student affairs mothers identified how yoga influenced their interactions with students is a significant contradiction to the patriarchal assumptions in which higher education is rooted. The participants’ experience of intrapersonal changes due to their yoga practice influenced their interpersonal relationships with students, as indicated in Kishida et al. (2018). Further aligned with Kishida et al. (2018), these results demonstrate how mindfulness provided the participants with less judgment and more patience in their interactions with students. The
women enacted heart-centered pedagogy by establishing trust with students while also encouraging and demonstrating vulnerability and pushing students outside of their comfort zones to think about their own wellness (Musial, 2012). They were also fully present with students, let go of the idea of changing or fixing someone, and invited challenges and transformation as part of their service to students (Musial, 2012).

**Stress Management Using Breathwork**

All of the participants mentioned using breathwork to manage stressful situations at work. The student affairs mothers talked about how their yoga practice allowed them to use this when they felt it was important to control their reaction, be mindful of their emotions, stay grounded in the moment, and temper anxiety. This type of mindfulness is associated with the importance of creating a pause between an initial reaction and a response, which can create space for more intentional responses to occur when engaging in anti-oppression work (Berila, 2016). For example, Sawyer shared that her staff were recently transitioning back to the office after working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, and she had been using breathwork as she supported them through sharing a range of emotions with her. She said she is “just taking those breaths really for me as I’m listening, so that helps my reaction to them.”

Similarly, the calmness that participants engaged off the mat to aid them in disagreements with others or in stressful situations is similar to findings in Kishida et al.’s (2018) research on yoga practitioners. By utilizing breathwork to manage difficult situations, student affairs mothers refuse to give into the competition and aggression reinforced in patriarchal environments. At the same time, some women may feel
compelled to control their emotions due to unfair stereotypes cast onto women as being overly emotional.

**Leadership Practices**

Two student affairs mothers spoke about how their yoga practice translates into their leadership style. They reflected on the importance of caring for staff members, avoiding overwork, showing appreciation, staying attentive to their needs, and honoring how someone is showing up in a meeting or classroom. Delaney explained her approach to working with her staff: “I said from the outset, you need to practice self-care. There’s always going to be more work, but you’re not gonna have more time on this earth to take care of yourself, you know. So, use your [vacation] time.” In many respects, the leadership actions described by these two participants align with Berila’s (2016) anti-oppression pedagogy. They noted how they reflected on unlearning and counteracting oppressive workplace cultures that devalue and dehumanize employees and instead center their engagement on developing compassion for them and instilling practices that honor and respect people’s presence and the contributions they make to the team.

**Direct Application of Yoga**

A number of student affairs mothers indicated they directly incorporate yoga practices in their work with students and colleagues. Two women offer *asana* (physical postures), *meditation* (contemplative practices), or *pranayama* (breathwork) to students as a part of their work at their institutions, while several others suggested or offered yoga practices for colleagues. For example, Betty described how April is a busy month for her and her team since it is sexual assault awareness month, so she will offer a yoga session for her volunteer staff and peer educators as a way to help them relax.
This commitment to sharing yoga practice with others aligns with Thompson’s (2017) pedagogy of tenderness, which explains that yoga practice can help students and educators acknowledge the disconnection we feel with our bodies and ignite the energetic body that is often left outside of a classroom or workspace. By engaging this energy, people have the capacity to interact with one another more deeply, tap into their vulnerability, and acquire new knowledge. Since the student affairs mothers noted these benefits from their own yoga practice, they felt compelled to share it with others within their work environments.

**Summary**

The connections that student affairs mothers made between their yoga practice and their professional experiences draw attention to the capacity for student affairs educators to incorporate engaged pedagogy in their work. The results show that, despite Berila’s (2016) mindful anti-oppression pedagogy, Thompson’s (2017) pedagogy of tenderness, and Musial’s (2012) heart-centered pedagogy being focused primarily on classroom contexts, the commitment to personal well-being that empowers students and educators translates to student affairs work via students’ co-curricular experiences. By integrating this approach in student affairs work, professionals focus more on their own well-being, which positively impacts their interactions with, and service provided to students.

The holistic learning environment that student affairs mothers created by engaging in these compassionate, heart-centered, anti-oppressive behaviors also translated into their interactions with colleagues. Mindful breathing, intentional leadership practices, and the inclusion of yoga practice in staff meetings and professional
development opportunities extend these engaged pedagogies further into the higher education environment. Ultimately, the integration of these practices challenges the capitalistic, patriarchal norms through which student affairs educators are typically expected to complete their work.

**Whiteness and Yoga**

All 10 participants of this study identified as White, but few of them noted their whiteness explicitly as it related to their identities as a woman, mother, or student affairs educator. Only when prompted about their racial identity did the women begin to reflect on its relation to their yoga practice and in some cases, their roles as student affairs educators and mothers. The lack of conversation about whiteness (and, by extension, other dominant social identities) was likely due to the fundamental influence of white supremacy and the default assumption that whiteness is the norm and does not need to be discussed, which may have been reinforced by my presence as a White, cisgender, woman researcher. Mintz (2018) cited the importance of studying whiteness, not only to de-centre white supremacy, to question its hegemony, and to create space for racial justice, but also to unpack the seemingly naturally cognitive dissonance and indeed insistence of non-racialized thinking of white women who tend to dominate in contemporary yoga spaces in North America (p. 48).

This further raised the question of what, if anything, these women had reflected on in relation to their racial identity and yoga practice.

Most of the participants did share that their yoga practice made them consider concepts such as the access women of color have to wellness practices, cultural appropriation of yoga, racial healing conversations, accessibility of the practice to people
of color, and the need to decolonize yoga in the United States. While some of the women indicated that they had done further reading or self-education about decolonizing practices, none indicated that they were necessarily engaged in this work within their yoga practice. As Barkataki (2020) explained, decolonization in yoga requires “not only to return the power and control to those from whom the cultural knowledge and practices came, but also to elevate and embrace the cultural elements indigenous to original yoga practice” (p. 130).

At the time of this study, many of the participants were engaging with yoga through online videos that are often designed for a wide audience with a variety of experience levels with asana practice; as such, these platforms may not always offer a critical lens through which one can learn about decolonizing yoga. According to Wijeyakumar (2022), “The continual colonization of Yoga is having asana as the main focus of your practice.” Furthermore, she suggests, “Reducing Yoga to mere asana does us all a disservice as it keeps the practice ableist, heteronormative, elitist, white washed and inaccessible which becomes another tool of oppression” (Wijeyakumar, 2022). Therefore, as White women, decolonizing yoga requires us to honor the philosophical Vedic origins of the practice and extend our understanding beyond physical practice.

In an analysis of White women integrating yoga as pedagogy in higher education, Douglass (2020) found that they did not see their integration of yoga as colonialist appropriation and “included yoga as pedagogy with the intention to rise above the individualism, mistrust and alienation from one’s self that they saw as part of higher education” (p. 50). Participants in Douglass’s (2020) study explained that higher education as a system overburdened them as faculty and promoted competition, fear, and
stress. This made the women feel powerless to change the system of higher education, but they felt that “a life oriented around the inner strength bestowed by yoga was superior as it was a panacea for the hectic and beleaguered life of academia” (Douglass, 2020, p. 56). Douglass (2020) cautioned against this sense of superiority and need for stability in higher education work and suggested the importance of cultivating two yogic qualities, humility and acknowledging the reality of instability, in its place. The results of Douglass’s study align with the experiences of capitalistic and patriarchal notions of competition, fear, and stress noted by White student affairs mothers in this research and provide a worthwhile warning against the desire to integrate yoga practice as a means to challenge these systems without truly working to dismantle them.

Much like arriving to and establishing a personal yoga practice, understanding and implementing decolonizing practices is a journey that unfolds over time. However, building self-awareness is the first critical step of this process. As discussed in A Bold Vision Forward: A Framework for the Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization developed by ACPA,

[Student affairs educators] must develop and nurture a mindset and way of being that prepares us to enact new possibility frameworks for our practice. Such preparation takes time, emotional energy, and an active dismantlement of the resistance within ourselves as the type of work we are suggesting within this framework does not come easily (Quaye et al., 2018, p. 9).

The Imperative further calls us to practice love in our work, see our capacity to intervene and disrupt systems of oppression, engage with humility, and center compassion and healing among other calls to action (Quaye et al., 2018). Many of the actions identified in
the Imperative align with actions and behaviors that yoga practice can offer. Insights regarding connections student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experience have the potential to demonstrate to the profession that giving time to engage in a wellness practice that includes yoga can have a profound influence on our work and our goals to achieve racial justice and decolonization.

This study suggests that White student affairs mothers who practice yoga must spend time unpacking our whiteness and the ways in which we continue to reinforce white supremacy at home, in our work context, and within our yoga practice. Only then can we begin to utilize our yoga practice to advance racial justice and decolonization. In the next section, I turn to suggestions for practice based on this analysis of results.

**Recommendations for Practice in Higher Education**

The results of this study indicate that institutions of higher education continue to operate as patriarchal, gendered organizations that are reluctant to implement structural change to upend the harmful practices to which women in particular are subjected (Acker, 1990; Chandhok, 2020; Fotaki, 2020). One way in which this occurs is by perpetuating ideal worker norms that expect women who are mothers to approach work as if they do not have children (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). This not only occurs through workload, but also through expectations of taking on additional emotional labor in the workplace and a lack of institutional policies that support mothers, other parents, and caregivers to contribute meaningful work to the organization while also being able to care for themselves and others in their lives. This study demonstrates that if student affairs mothers want to achieve components of the Personal and Ethical Foundations professional competency as written by ACPA and NASPA, they have to make the time
and space for it themselves without much support from their institutions. Therefore, there are several suggestions for practice based on the results of this study, which are offered here for divisions of student affairs, offices of human resources, and higher education and student affairs graduate programs.

**Divisions of Student Affairs**

The results of this study indicate that there is still a lack of women’s representation in senior leadership roles within student affairs, and likely even more so related to women of color. As early as student affairs preparation programs at the master’s degree level, women begin to question what their career trajectory might be based on the dearth of women leaders. Institutions of higher education should take measures to improve the leadership development of women in student affairs, and especially for women who are mothers. As this study demonstrates, student affairs mothers have a wealth of knowledge, experience, and compassion to offer students and colleagues, and institutions cannot afford to lose this cohort of women as more professionals seek to leave the field of student affairs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Divisions of student affairs should conduct an audit to understand how many women they have in leadership, develop and implement procedures that require succession planning for mid- to senior-level positions that involve building a pipeline of future women leaders, and invest in professional development trainings, mentorship programs, and coaching opportunities that promote the leadership development of women in student affairs. These opportunities must consider the patriarchal, gendered, and
capitalist systems in which institutions are entrenched and design initiatives rooted in antiracist, feminist leadership.

Additionally, divisions of student affairs should conduct regular climate surveys to understand the experience of their staff members and be able to disaggregate the data in meaningful ways to identify key culture issues that need to be addressed for certain identity groups. In light of the current retention concerns in higher education, attention should be paid to what creates stress for employees, how time is managed by student affairs leadership, and how financial resources are allocated among staff for programmatic needs and salaries. Leaders must then use this data to implement cultural changes within their divisions. Student affairs units should seek to examine patriarchal and capitalist behaviors that are embedded into their workplace culture to then identify the harm caused and how these expectations and behaviors can be replaced with ones rooted in compassionate, heart-centered, anti-oppression pedagogies.

Divisions of student affairs can also consider instituting protected and honored wellness hours on employees calendars each week that give them time to focus on their own wellness in whatever way is meaningful to them. Several women in this study used time during the workday to attend a yoga class on or off campus, practice yoga on their own, meditate, go on walks with colleagues, take a nap, or eat snacks or meals. Some professionals may want to use a portion of the workday to attend wellness initiatives offered on or near campus, or to arrive late or leave early to attend to these needs.

Leaders will need to let go of white supremacist and capitalist notions of productivity if they truly want to improve the employee experience. Student affairs units have an obligation to their staff to support them in ways that help everyone achieve
developmental progress with professional competencies outlined by ACPA and NASPA (2015), including those in the Personal and Ethical Foundations competency related to healthy habits, stress-management, building healthy relationships, and engaging in thoughtful reflection.

**Offices of Human Resources**

The results of this study indicate that women experience disparate impacts in the workplace based upon their gender identity and parenting status. These impacts included biased expectations, loss of advancement opportunities, and inadequate support for understanding, planning for, and returning from family leave. Human resource policies should include a comprehensive, equitable, and compassionate paid family leave policy that provides any parent or caregiver with adequate time to be away from work for caregiving needs. Supervisors should be trained on this policy prior to a staff member needing to use it, and they should support a staff member in developing a realistic transition plan for their time away and a reentry plan for their return to work. Having adequate insurance options to assist with the cost of pregnancy, loss, adoption, infertility, mental health support, and other holistic health needs is vital to employees being able to focus on their wellness. Offering childcare on campus can further reduce some of the challenges that parenting employees face with balancing caregiving needs and work, especially for young children.

Human resources should also provide training to employees about how to prevent and report different types of bias, discrimination, and harassment. This training should touch upon the negative consequences of such behavior toward women, mothers and other caregivers, pregnant individuals, people undergoing fertility treatments, individuals
who have experienced pregnancy or infant loss, and chestfeeding or pumping individuals. This training should also cover the impact of these behaviors on other institutionally oppressed populations among employees and students. Ideally, this training is ongoing, offered in a variety of delivery methods, and accessible to all employees.

Institutions can also implement flexible work options that include remote work to encourage employee well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that many higher education professionals are capable of functioning successfully in their roles through a remote setting, even if it is part of a hybrid work model. Human resources must also consider offering affinity spaces for employees based on different identities such as White employees, employees of color, employees responsible for caregiving, LGBTQIA+ employees, among others based on specific campus needs. These types of groups, when run well and perhaps using engaged pedagogy, can offer employees vital communal support and opportunities for personal and professional growth related to their identities.

**Higher Education and Student Affairs Graduate Programs**

Higher education and student affairs preparation programs at both the master’s and doctoral levels have an obligation to expose students to engaged pedagogy, both through the teaching pedagogy employed by faculty and content included in the curriculum. If more future student affairs professionals experience engaged pedagogy like heart-centered pedagogy, pedagogy of tenderness, and mindful anti-oppression pedagogy and are taught how to make connections among these pedagogies and feminist and critical race, whiteness, tribal, queer, and disability theories, student affairs educators will be set up to enact racial justice and decolonization called for within the ACPA
Strategic Imperative. This research begins to demonstrate that student affairs educators can incorporate these pedagogical approaches into their work by centering the individual experiences of learners, acknowledging emotion, creating space for reflection, and fostering individual growth rather than competition, all of which get lost in the systems of patriarchy and white supremacy in which higher education is deeply entrenched.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sought to fill a gap in the literature by centering the voices of women who have established a successful wellness practice through yoga. However, this research was limited to the perspective of 10 White student affairs educators who are mothers. This study should be replicated with a more racially and ethnically diverse participant pool to determine how other racial/ethnic identities intersect with the student affairs mother identity and impact how yoga practice influences their professional experiences. Research that examines the influence of yoga practice on student affairs educators who practice yoga, regardless of parenting status, could offer further insight into how yoga practice contributes to the meaningful integration of engaged pedagogies in student affairs work. Expanding research to student affairs educators that focuses on the influence of other types of wellness practice could offer additional awareness of how other wellness practices may benefit the higher education environment.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this feminist narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. Through two semi-structured interviews and written journal responses from 10 White student affairs mothers, I was able to center positive wellness stories of women who are marginalized in
patriarchal, gendered student affairs settings. The results demonstrated ways in which these student affairs mothers challenged capitalistic and patriarchal expectations by committing to a growth process that promotes their own wellness through a regular yoga practice. In turn, their commitment to yoga practice promoted an integration of engaged pedagogy into their work as student affairs educators. Despite these positive outcomes, institutions of higher education must confront the lack of women’s leadership in senior-level positions and invest in dismantling capitalistic and patriarchal expectations that limit the success and growth of employees.
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Wijeyakumar, A. [@shantiwithin]. (2022, March 15). #decolonize Yoga is so much more than asana the physical postural practice. Don’t get me wrong I LOVE asana, but [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CbJRdC7JSPq/


APPENDIX A

KISHIDA ET AL.’S (2018) CONCEPTUAL MODEL DEPICTING YOGA AND RELATIONAL VARIABLES OF INTEREST
Note: While the proposed model is depicted linearly, the dynamic relations that may exist between constructs should not be omitted, based on context and time scale. Yoga could also directly lead to improved health and wellbeing (e.g., physical function as an outcome), depending on the specific health and wellbeing outcome of interest.

From “‘Yoga Resets My Inner Peace Barometer’: A Qualitative Study Illuminating the Pathways of How Yoga Impacts One’s Relationship to Oneself and to Others” by M. Kishida, S. K. Mama, L. K. Larkey, and S. Elavsky, 2018, Complementary Therapies in Medicine, 40, p. 217. Copyright 2020 by Elsevier Inc.
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT SOLICITATIONS
Hello S.A.M.S.! I am a doctoral student in the Student Affairs Administration and Leadership Ed.D. program at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and I am currently seeking participants for my dissertation study.

The purpose of my feminist narrative inquiry study is to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. Specifically, I am seeking to understand what compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga as a wellness practice, how they sustain a yoga practice, and what connections, if any, student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please visit the link below for additional information and to complete a prospective participant demographic survey.  

https://uwlax.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eb2PXDqQVBVNKaw

If you know someone who may be eligible to participate in this research, please share this information and link with them. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact me at duffield2442@uwlax.edu. Thank you!

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**Exploring the Influence of Yoga Practice on the Professional Experiences of Student Affairs Mothers**

**Participants must:**
- Identify as a woman and mother to one or more children between the ages of newborn-17 with whom they currently live
- Have earned a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs or a related field
- Have completed at least 1 year of full-time work and currently work in a student affairs position at a 2-year or 4-year public or private higher education institution in the United States
- Have an established personal yoga practice that takes place either at home or through a community setting at least once a week for at least 10 consecutive weeks

**Participation entails:**
- A 30-minute recorded introductory meeting with the researcher via video conferencing; two 1-2 hour recorded interviews with the researcher via video conferencing; responding to brief journal prompts once a week for 4 weeks, and reviewing the participant’s own interview summary for accuracy

**Participant incentives include:**
- $25 for each completed interview and a yoga-related book of the participant’s choice valued at no more than $25 for completed journal prompts for 4 weeks

This study has been approved by the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse IRB. Questions can be directed to the Principal Investigator, Jennifer K. Duffield, at duffield2442@uwlax.edu
Happy May WISA members!

We hope that as the weather is changing for many of you, the days are bringing more sunshine, laughter and love with all that’s going on around us. Please check out our monthly WISA engagement below.

Open Leadership Team Positions

Our team is almost complete! We’d love to have you join us as we have the following vacant Leadership Team positions remaining:

- (1) Advancement Co-Chair

The application for this role can be found on Volunteer Central. We will be checking applications weekly until the position is filled.

Registration and Call for Programs is NOW OPEN: Region IV-E Virtual "Drive-In" Conference

This year, the Region IV-E WISA KC is hosting their drive-in conference virtually on June 3-4, 2021. This planning committee is excited for this year’s theme Shattering Ceilings. "No day like today, no year like this year, no self like myself."

Have an innovative program that aligns with the theme? Have an experience to be shared with other women? Submit a conference program proposal! The deadline is May 15, 2021. You do not have to be in region IV-E to participate.

Registration is also open and is required for this event. More registration information can be found here on the website. For immediate questions regarding the virtual drive-in conference please contact Tamela Scott at dstuffl2@uwyo.edu.

WISA Women’s Research & Scholarship Winner: Research Support Needed

Jennifer K. Duffield, one of our 20-21 award recipients, is a doctoral student in the Student Affairs Administration and Leadership Ed. program in the Department of Student Affairs Administration at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

She is currently sending participants for her feminist narrative inquiry dissertation study exploring the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs officers. Participants must identity as a woman and mother who is working in student affairs and has an established personal yoga practice.

For more information about participant criteria, participation expectations, and incentives and to indicate interest in participating, visit her prospective participant demographic survey. Please direct any questions about this study to Jennifer at duffield2442@uwyo.edu.

Have any questions for us? Have any unique ideas? We’re always open to hearing from our membership. Please do not hesitate to connect with us via email at naspa-womxn@uwyo.edu and naspa-womxn@uwyo.edu.

Kind regards,

Dr. Eboni Ford Tumbow
Dr. Natalie Turman
WISA KC Co-Chairs
APPENDIX C

PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Thank you for indicating interest in the Exploring the Influence of Yoga Practice on the Professional Experiences of Student Affairs Mothers research study. To determine your eligibility to participate, please read the information below and complete the demographic survey on the next page.

The purpose of this feminist narrative inquiry study is to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. Specifically, the researcher is seeking to understand what compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga as a wellness practice, how they sustain a yoga practice, and what connections, if any, student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences.

The researcher/Principal Investigator for this study is Jennifer K. Duffield, a student in the Student Affairs Administration and Leadership Ed.D. program at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. She can be reached via email at duffield2442@uwlax.edu.

In order to be eligible to participate in this study, interested individuals must:

- Identify as a woman
- Identify as a mother to one or more children between the ages of newborn to 17 with whom they currently live
- Have earned a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs or a related field
- Have completed at least 1 year of full-time work and currently work in a student affairs position
- Work at a 2-year or 4-year public or private higher education institution in the United States
- Have an established personal yoga practice that takes place either at home (independently or with the use of online video instruction) or through a community setting (gym, yoga studio, park district, etc.) at least once a week for at least ten consecutive weeks

For the purposes of this study, yoga is defined as a practice that combines physical postures, breathwork, and meditation to bring unity among the mind, body, and heart.

The total time requirement for participation is approximately 7-8 hours over a 3–4 month period. Participation will involve the following:

- One 30-minute recorded introductory meeting with the researcher to be held via video conferencing
- An initial 1-2 hour recorded interview with the researcher via video conferencing
- Writing responses to brief online journal prompts once a week for 4 weeks that will be submitted to the researcher
- A second 1-2 hour recorded interview with the researcher via video conferencing
- Reviewing the participant’s own interview summary via email

Participants will receive a $25 cash incentive for completing the first interview, a yoga-related book of their choice valued at no more than $25 for completing journal prompts.
for 4 weeks, and a $25 cash incentive for completing the second interview. Additional participant benefits include the potential to draw a greater connection between the participant’s professional work and yoga practice, and to provide insight to other student affairs mothers about how to sustain a wellness practice.

Questions regarding study procedures may be directed to Jennifer K. Duffield, Principal Investigator (duffield2442@uwlax.edu), or the study advisor, Dr. Tori Svoboda, Associate Professor in the Department of Student Affairs Administration at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (tsvoboda@uwlax.edu).

If you believe you meet the participant criteria, please continue to the next page to complete the prospective participant demographic survey to submit your interest. After submitting the survey, the Principal Investigator will be in touch with you via email to inform you of your eligibility to participate in this study.

First Name

Last Name

Email Address

Do you have access to a web camera and microphone?
- Yes
- No

In which time zone are you located?
- Eastern Daylight Time (GMT-4)
- Central Daylight Time (GMT-5)
- Mountain Daylight Time (GMT-6)
- Mountain Standard Time (GMT-7)
- Pacific Daylight Time (GMT-7)
- Alaska Daylight Time (GMT-8)
- Hawaii-Aleutian Daylight Time (GMT-9)
- Hawaii-Aleutian Standard Time (GMT-10)

Current Institution of Employment

Current Job Title

What is your current job position level?
- New Professional
- Mid-Level Professional
- Senior Level
- Assistant Vice President
- Vice President/Senior Student Affairs Officer
- Other
Do you identify as a woman?
   o Yes
   o No

Do you identify as a mother to one or more children between the ages of newborn to 17 years old with whom you currently live?
   o Yes
   o No

How many children do you have under you care at home?

What is/are the child/children’s age(s)?

Have you earned a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs or a related field?
   o Yes
   o No

Have you completed at least one year of full-time work and do you continue to work in a role that falls under the student affairs or student life umbrella?
   o Yes
   o No

Do you work at a two-year or four-year public or private institution of higher education in the United States?
   o Yes
   o No

Do you have an established personal yoga practice that takes place either at home (independently or with the use of online video instruction) or through a community setting (gym, yoga studio, park district, etc.) at least once a week for at least ten consecutive weeks?
   o Yes
   o No

Please describe your yoga practice in a few sentences (i.e. where do you practice, how frequently, what type of yoga).

How long have you been practicing yoga?

Are you a U.S. citizen, U.S. permanent resident, or U.S. resident alien?
   o Yes
   o No

What is your racial/ethnic identity?
What is your age?

What other identities do you hold that are salient to you as someone who practices yoga?

Thank you for submitting your interest in serving as a participant for this study. Questions regarding this study may be directed to Jennifer K. Duffield, the Principal Investigator, at duffield2442@uwlax.edu. Jennifer will be in touch with you via email to inform you of your eligibility to participate in this study.
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Influence of Yoga Practice on the Professional Experiences of Student Affairs Mothers

Principal Investigator: Jennifer K. Duffield

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of yoga practice on the professional experiences of student affairs mothers. Specifically, the researcher is seeking to understand what compels student affairs mothers to engage in yoga as a wellness practice, how they sustain a yoga practice, and what connections, if any, student affairs mothers make between their yoga practice and their professional experiences.

The results of this study will be published as a dissertation and may be published in professional literature or presented at professional conferences, keeping your participation confidential and anonymous.

What will my participation entail?
Your participation will involve the following:
• One 30-minute recorded introductory meeting with the researcher to be held via video conferencing
• An initial 1-2 hour recorded interview with the researcher via video conferencing
• Writing responses to brief online journal prompts once a week for 4 weeks that will be submitted to the researcher
• A second 1-2 hour recorded interview with the researcher via video conferencing
• Reviewing your own interview summary via email

The total time requirement is approximately 7-8 hours over a 3-4 month period.

What are the potential risks?
Risks are limited but may include emotional or psychological distress if you bring up prior or current challenges in response to the interview questions. The risk of serious or life-threatening concerns is near zero.

What are the possible benefits?
As a participant in this study, you may be able to draw a greater connection between your professional work and yoga practice. You may be able to provide insight to other student affairs mothers about how to sustain a wellness practice.

How will my information be kept confidential?
All information will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Your data will not be linked with any personally identifiable information.
What rights do I have as a participant in this study?
Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not you want to participate. You can withdraw or refuse to answer any questions without consequences at any time for any reason. Neither the refusal to participate nor the decision to discontinue participation at any time will involve penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

Will I have to pay for anything?
This research study does not require you to pay for anything.

What are the participant incentives?
As a participant in this study, you will receive a $25 cash incentive for completing the first interview. You will receive a yoga-related book of your choice valued at no more than $25 for completing journal prompts for 4 weeks. You will receive a $25 cash incentive for completing the second interview. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will receive the corresponding incentive for any stage of the research you have completed and for the stage during which you withdraw.

Who can I contact if I have questions about my rights as a participant or about the study procedures?
Questions regarding study procedures may be directed to:

Jennifer K. Duffield, Principal Investigator
duffield2442@uwlax.edu

or the study advisor,

Dr. Tori Svoboda, Associate Professor in the Department of Student Affairs Administration
(608) 785-6759
tsvobera@uwlax.edu
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
1725 State Street
345F Morris Hall
La Crosse, WI 54601

Questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to irb@uwlaex.edu.

By signing this form, you acknowledge that you have read this consent form and you agree to participate in this research study.

Participant________________________________  Date__________________

Researcher_________________________________  Date__________________
APPENDIX E

FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. To start off, I would like to get to know more about you and your background.
   a. Can you share a bit about yourself and your identities?
   b. How did you arrive in the student affairs profession?
   c. How would you describe your current role in student affairs?

2. Identifying as a woman and a mother were criteria for participating in this study.
   a. When did your identity as a woman first become salient to you as a student affairs educator?
   b. How would you describe your journey into motherhood?
   c. When did your identity as a mother first become salient to you as a student affairs educator?

3. The importance of self-care is something we hear a lot about in the student affairs profession and as mothers.
   a. When did you begin to pay attention to your wellness as a student affairs educator and mother?
   b. How has your perspective of wellness changed over time?

4. Yoga is a part of your life right now.
   a. How did you become engaged with yoga?
   b. What does your yoga practice look like? What types of yoga do you prefer and how long do you typically practice?
   c. What makes you utilize yoga as a wellness practice?
   d. What benefits do you experience from practicing yoga?
   e. What drawbacks do you experience from practicing yoga?
5. I imagine incorporating yoga into your schedule as a student affairs mother requires some intentionality.

   a. What was the process like for you to begin to incorporate yoga into your life as a mother and student affairs professional?

   b. Over time, what have you noticed you need to sustain your yoga practice?
APPENDIX F

JOURNAL PROMPTS
Instructions: At least one time this week after your yoga practice, please complete the following reflection prompts. Your answers can be as long or as short as you would like, but please be as descriptive as possible. You may also choose to not answer any reflection prompt without consequence.

Please enter your first and last name.

Please enter today’s date.

1. What brought you to your yoga mat today? What was on your mind before you began your practice?

2. What emotions did you experience throughout your day prior to yoga practice? What prompted them?

3. What was difficult about your yoga practice today?

4. What was fulfilling about your practice today?

5. What did you notice about yourself after your practice? What was on your mind after you completed your practice?

6. What emotions, feelings, or sensations are you experiencing now that you have completed your yoga practice?

Thank you for submitting your Week # Journal. You will receive a link to the Week # Journal this coming Sunday. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at duffield2442@uwlax.edu.
APPENDIX G
SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. We have established that yoga is an important aspect of your wellness plan.
   a. What purpose does yoga have in your life as a student affairs mother?
   b. What personal benefits do you see from yoga?
   c. What professional benefits do you see from yoga?

2. Yoga has various components that include *asanas* (physical postures), *pranayama* (breathwork), and *meditation* (contemplative practices).
   a. How would you describe your engagement with asana on a daily basis outside of your traditional yoga practice?
   b. How would you describe your engagement with breathwork on a daily basis outside of your traditional yoga practice?
   c. How would you describe your engagement with meditation on a daily basis outside of your traditional yoga practice?

3. Something that I noted in your journal responses was…

4. How does your yoga practice show up when working with students and colleagues?

5. Student affairs educators face many challenges in their work.
   a. Can you remember a time when you noticed that elements of your yoga practice helped you navigate a difficult situation?
   b. Can you remember a time when you noticed that your yoga practice challenged your work as a student affairs educator?
   c. How else has your yoga practice influenced your professional experience as a student affairs mother?
6. Some participants have shared that they enjoy practicing alone after interacting with others all day, while others have practiced in a studio or found a yoga community.
   a. How does your yoga practice relate to your own need for community or solitude?
   b. How does that interact with your identity as a student affairs mother?

7. Many of the participants in this study also identified as White on the demographic form but speaking about this racial identity did not come up organically in my first interview with most participants.
   a. Is there anything you’d like to share about your identity as a White student affairs mother who practices yoga?
   b. How do you see your yoga practice showing up in your life related to your other identities?

8. Something that I noticed consistently among the participants of this study was that for women who gave birth to their children, many experienced infertility or pregnancy/infant loss, and those who did not have that experience acknowledged that having what some described as an “easy” pregnancy was not the experience of all women. I’m wondering if you have any thoughts around this or if there’s anything you’d like to expand on about your own experience after hearing this.

9. How has your yoga practice influenced how you view your role as a student affairs educator and mother?
10. Understanding the benefits you have received from yoga, do you think institutions of higher education should integrate yoga practice for employees or students? What would this look like?
APPENDIX H

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Job Position Level</th>
<th>Job Focus</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Length of Time Practicing Yoga</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Mid-sized, private, 4-year university in Northeast</td>
<td>Mid-level professional</td>
<td>Gender-based violence prevention</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Mid-sized, private, 4-year university in Northeast</td>
<td>Mid-level professional</td>
<td>Student success</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Mid-sized, public, 4-year university in Northeast</td>
<td>Mid-level professional</td>
<td>Wellness promotion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaney</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Mid-sized, public, 4-year university in Midwest</td>
<td>Senior student affairs officer</td>
<td>Multiple student affairs functions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Large, public, 4-year university in Northeast</td>
<td>Mid-level professional</td>
<td>Academic advising</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 year regularly, 15 years on and off</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maeve</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Large, public, 4-year university in Midwest</td>
<td>Mid-level professional</td>
<td>Student support and wellness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10-15 years on and off</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Large, private, 4-year university in Northeast</td>
<td>Mid-level professional</td>
<td>Academic advising</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Small, private, 4-year university in Southeast</td>
<td>Mid-level professional</td>
<td>Academic support and success</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sawyer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Large, public, 4-year university in Midwest</td>
<td>Senior-level professional</td>
<td>Student conduct</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A few months</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veradis</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Large, public, 4-year university in Mountain West</td>
<td>Mid-level professional</td>
<td>Academic advising</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>45</td>
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