

Qualitative Examination of Women Student Affairs Professionals' Perceptions of Job Satisfaction in Louisiana Public Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

One of the most impacted areas in higher education is the field of student affairs (Lynch, 2017). While job satisfaction is problematic in higher education; only 1% of professionals are “extremely satisfied” with their job, giving the field a much lower overall satisfaction level than many other occupations (Kinman & Wray, 2014). Additionally, women are experiencing job dissatisfaction at the highest rates (Beeny et al., 2005) and student affairs is a field primarily occupied by women (MacAlpine, 2022). Research shows one of the more dramatic results of job satisfaction is when dissatisfaction leads to burnout (Kahill, 2007). Women in student affairs are rapidly leaving the field due to job dissatisfaction (Bender, 2009). The authors share findings from a phenomenological qualitative research study designed to assess job satisfaction of women student affairs professionals in entry, mid, and senior level higher education positions relating to job satisfaction and leadership, motivation, productivity, and burnout. The overarching research question is, *What are the perceptions of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana public higher education institutions regarding job satisfaction in relation to leadership, motivation, productivity, and burnout?* Data analyses resulted in identification of six major findings relating to higher sense of value, high levels of trust, senior-level satisfaction, expectations not aligned with compensation, student impact as a high motivator, and impact of crises on burnout among women student affairs professionals in Louisiana higher education institutions. The finding implications are shared from theory, practice, and future research perspectives, as well as implications for leadership and practice.

Keywords: job satisfaction, women student affairs professionals, sense of value, trust, higher education

Job satisfaction is indeed problematic in higher education with only 1% of professionals indicating they are “extremely satisfied” with their job, giving the field a much lower overall

satisfaction level than many other occupations (Kinman & Wray, 2014). While the level of satisfaction can be questionable among higher education professionals, research shows many professionals do care deeply about the work they do (Lourdes Machado-Taylor et al., 2014).

Green (2000) discussed the impact of job satisfaction on society as a whole stating:

Job satisfaction is important to individuals, organizations, and society. High job satisfaction levels can be viewed as health indicators. Job satisfaction is one of the micro aspects of the macro concept of life satisfaction. Job satisfaction, viewed as one of the outcomes of organizational operations, can be a reflection of effectiveness and efficiency. Organizations influence individuals' life satisfaction via job satisfaction, which in turn contributes to the well-being of society. (p. 23)

Despite the love for the work, higher education professionals have been forced to change dramatically in recent years to accommodate a larger number of individuals with fewer resources (Cameron, 2011; Hannum et al., 2015; McCaffery, 2010). McCaffery (2010) states, "the demands made upon higher education managers are greater today than they have ever been" (p. x).

Research has found satisfied higher education employees to be more productive (Bender, 2009). Bender (2009) indicates, "job satisfaction seemingly improved the respondents' completion of assignments; willingness to spend additional time on the job; interaction with colleagues; initiations of new projects; interaction with supervisor and students, and accessibility" (p. 557). However, dissatisfied workers can have the opposite effect on an organization. Berwick (1992) found "job satisfaction was the most significant predictor of work-related stress" (p. 17).

One of the most impacted areas in higher education has been the field of *student affairs* (Lynch, 2017). Student affairs divisions can include a variety of specialty areas but "a student affairs division today typically includes responsibility for such functions as enrollment management, financial aid, housing, counseling, student health, judicial programs, career services, recreational sports, and student activities" (Sandeen, 2004, p. 30). Rhoads and Black (1995) stated:

Student affairs practitioners play a crucial role in the way college and university communities are structured. Typically, student affairs professionals are seen as being concerned primarily with [students'] out-of-class experiences. However, the campus

climate and organizational culture within which students learn and grow include much more than out-of-class experiences. If student affairs professionals are to have a significant impact on students' overall development, they must be actively involved in shaping the larger academic community. (p. 418)

Cameron (2011) bolsters this point by comparing a student affairs professional lifestyle to a high-power corporate leader in regard to the intense, fast-paced environment. Cameron (2011) describes a student affairs professional's typical day expectations to include, "commute to and from campus, attend back-to-back departmental and student organization meetings, participate in conference calls for national associations, react to student crises, respond to numerous emails, attend campus activities, [and] network with alumni and donors" (p. 86), in addition to their personal commitments. Other researchers agree the expectations of student affairs professionals can be quite high.

Rush (2019) found "professional support personnel are highly engaged in their jobs and perceived their contributions to their institutions as positive, describing their roles as student centered, revenue generating, supporting faculty, partnering with the community, and overall supporting their institutions" (p. 104). Schuh, Jones, and Torres (2003) agree stating, "caring underlies the fundamental mission of student affairs and of institutions of higher education" (p. 101).

Leadership and motivation play important roles in the job satisfaction of student affairs professionals particularly with supervision (Komives & Woodard, 2003; Lombardi, 2013; Rush, 2019). This is a problem in student affairs since many professionals are using uninformed and untrained supervision techniques that are detrimental to job satisfaction (Lombardi, 2013). Multiple areas related to motivation influence job satisfaction including compensation, benefits, advancement opportunities, and student interaction (Bender, 2009; Oshagbemi, 2000). Many student affairs professionals are extremely unsatisfied with their pay and are also not experiencing benefits such as professional development or flexible time options (Lombardi, 2013; Oshagbemi, 2000). Advancement in employment is also lacking because of the pyramid like structure of student affairs with very few at the top (Lorden, 1995). Lombardi (2013) indicated motivation can also be impacted by the level of student interaction, finding those with less student interaction were more satisfied.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the demands of student affairs professionals. Student affairs employees are often first responders in crisis situations, and the COVID-19 pandemic was no different (Trueblood, 2021). Sending workers home to begin remote work has resulted in a negative impact on job satisfaction (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagińska, 2021). While already managing the pandemic's impact on students, Louisiana higher education institutions experienced a number of natural disasters that have also impacted job satisfaction. Fifty-five percent of Louisiana's public university student population was impacted directly by 2021's Hurricane Ida (Canicosa, 2021). These changes to higher education and disasters unsurprisingly have impacted stress levels of those employed in higher education. "Seventy-three percent of respondents to a previous survey conducted in 2012 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *I find my job stressful*, compared with 87% [in 2014]" (Kinman & Wray, 2014, p. 3). To emphasize the point further, Kinman and Wray (2014) found "62% [of the sample] often or always experienced levels of stress they found unacceptable" (p. 3).

Women are experiencing job dissatisfaction at the highest rates (Beeny et al., 2005). Student affairs is a field occupied primarily by women (MacAlpine, 2022). However, Bender (2009) found higher levels of satisfaction in men in the field of student affairs stating, "of the men [in her sample], 26% strongly agreed they were satisfied with their jobs, while 12% of the women indicated a similar level of satisfaction" (p. 556). Research suggest this is likely due to a lack of supportive networks and family obligations (Glover, 2009; Maranto & Griffin, 2011). Both men and women have been impacted by positional level. Job satisfaction of student affairs professionals among new professionals and mid-level professionals are the least satisfied and senior level are the most satisfied (Cameron, 2011; Lombardi, 2012; Marshall et al., 2016).

Research shows one of the more dramatic results of job satisfaction is when dissatisfaction leads to burnout (Kahill, 2007). Burnout is present in the field of higher education and is problematic for many reasons (Wiggers et al., 1982). A vast amount of research has shown burnout is detrimental to an employee's health. For instance, Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (2015) found burnout was associated with "physical exhaustion, insomnia, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and marital and family problems" (p. 192). Moreover, Wiggers, Forney, and Wallace-Schutzman (1982) determined burnout could cause "a significant loss of motivation, enthusiasm, and energy" (p. 13). Stoves (2014) echoed these findings and stated burnout caused loss of sleep and focus. Job satisfaction in higher education is low among all groups with women

experiencing the highest dissatisfaction and potential for burnout. The need for institutional change is essential to the future of higher education.

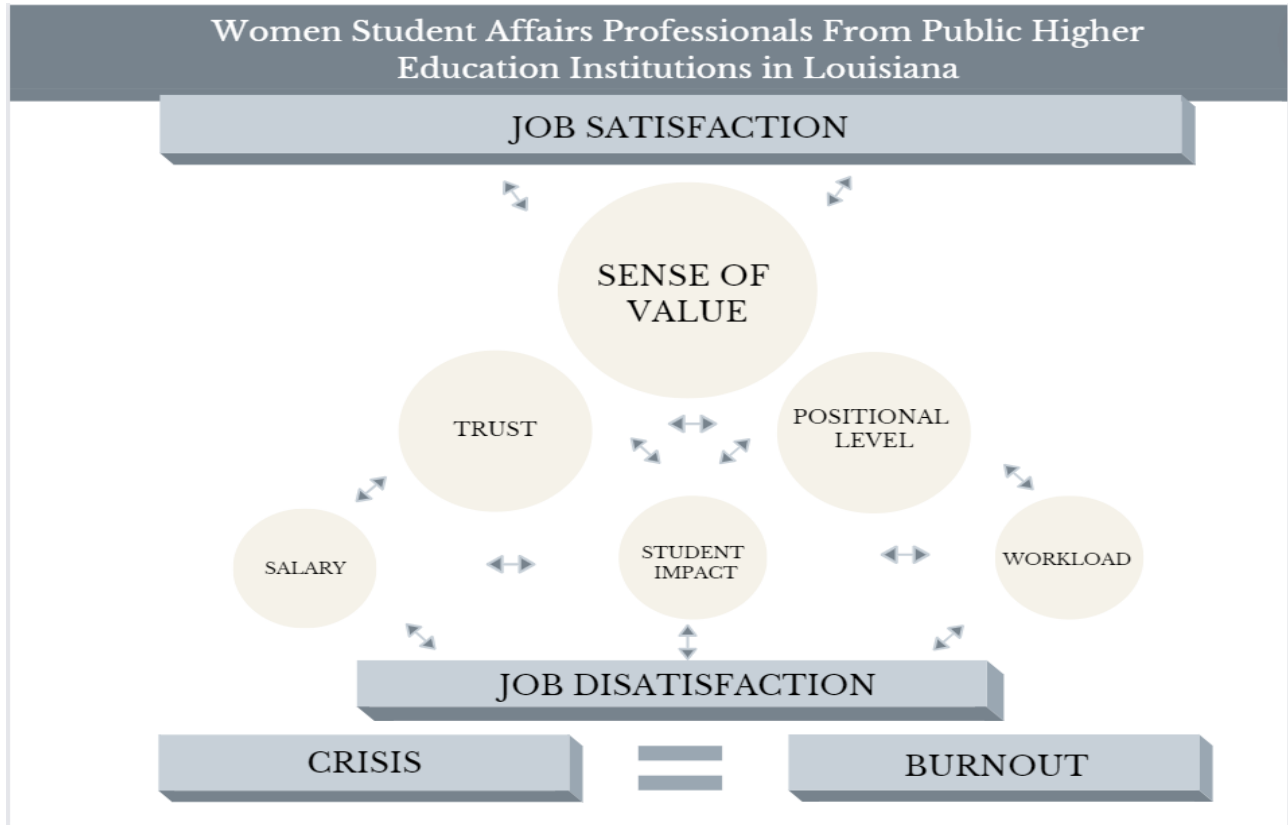
Study Purpose and Conceptual Framework

The authors share findings from a qualitative research study designed to examine perceptions of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana higher education institutions regarding: (a) job satisfaction and leadership; (b) job satisfaction and motivation; (c) job satisfaction and productivity; and (d) job satisfaction and burnout. The overarching question guiding this research is, *What are the perceptions of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana public higher education institutions regarding job satisfaction in relation to leadership, motivation, productivity, and burnout?*

The initial conceptual framework designed to guide the research focused on the influence of leadership, positional level, and motivation in relation to job satisfaction or dissatisfaction of higher education professionals, and highlighted productivity as a key determinant differentiating job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction and the potential for burnout. Figure 1 illustrates the adaptation of the original framework adjusted to align with the study's findings. While productivity was initially viewed as a significant construct of job satisfaction, data results from this research study illustrated there was no link between job satisfaction and productivity. The researcher replaced motivation and leadership with related, but more specific constructs including sense of value, positional level, and trust. Study findings indicated these three constructs had the greatest impact on job satisfaction. Other constructs influencing job satisfaction based on study findings include salary, student impact, and workload. Each of these constructs are connected to both job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction illustrating a potential relationship between the five constructs highlighted and the type of satisfaction based on the experience of the professional. The framework includes burnout, defined by Freudenberger (1974) as "to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources" (p. 159). In the revised framework, burnout is no longer directly connected to job dissatisfaction, defined by Locke (1969) as "the unpleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job as frustrating or blocking the attainment of one's job values or as entailing disvalues" (p. 316). The researcher did not find a direct link between job dissatisfaction and burnout but did find a connection between crisis and burnout.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Revised



Qualitative Research Design and Procedures

A qualitative research design utilizing interviews examined perceptions of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana higher education institutions regarding job satisfaction in relation to leadership, motivation, productivity, and burnout. This qualitative phenomenological approach defined the participants “experiences of a phenomenon” (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 383). This design assisted the researcher in understanding each study participant’s unique experiences regarding job satisfaction in student affairs. From these unique experiences, the researcher was able to find commonalities that speak to the purpose of this research.

Sample

The sample population for this study was derived from the Louisiana Association of College and University Student Personnel Administrators (LACUSPA). LACUSPA is an organization servicing higher education professionals, students, and associates in Louisiana

higher education institutions (LACUSPA, 2018). The professional membership of LACUSPA includes student personnel administrators, those employed within the area of student affairs, and educators who prepare student personnel workers (LACUSPA, 2018). In addition to the LACUSPA membership, the researcher reviewed college and university student affairs staff pages for additional personnel who may not have appeared on the LACUSPA list. The target population was women student affairs professionals in two- and four-year public institutions in Louisiana which includes 24 total institutions. The sample included a mix of entry-level, mid-level, and senior level student affairs professionals. Participants identified as women and were currently employed in a full-time student affairs position classified as entry, mid-level, or senior level in an institution of higher education at the time of the interview.

The researcher identified three entry-level, three mid-level, and three executive level student affairs professionals to interview. Participants could choose to email or call with interest and were selected on a first response, first-selected method with consideration of the entry-level represented, as well as representation of 2-year and 4-year institutions. Entry level was defined as a student affairs professional with 1-3 years in the field or a title of coordinator. Mid-level was defined as a student affairs professional with 4-10 years in the field and/or a title of director. Senior-level was defined as a student affairs professional with a title of vice president, vice chancellor, chancellor, or president. A total of nine professionals were interviewed including three entry-level, three mid-level, and three senior level.

The participants job related demographics indicated the majority of the nine participants (88%) worked at a 4-year institution. The executive area of student affairs represented the largest percentage of participants at 33%, followed by 22% representing the residential area, with counseling comprising 22% of the participants. One participant represented student activities, while one participant worked in the area of fraternity and sorority life. The most common position title among participants was Vice President for Student Affairs accounting for 33% of participants. The other participant job titles included: director of residential life, student life coordinator, area coordinator, counselor and clinical coordinator, and director of student organizations and fraternity and sorority life. The level of participants was intentionally evenly distributed to include 33% in entry level, 33% in mid-level, and 33% at senior level. Most participants (44%) had 15 years or more experience in student affairs; 33% had 4-15 years of experience in student affairs; and 22% had recently entered the field with 0-3 years. The majority

of participants were fairly new to their current role with 55% having spent 0-3 years in their current position. The remaining 44% had been in their current role 4-15 years. Lastly, 88% of participants had supervisory responsibilities in their current role, while only 11% had no supervisory responsibility.

Interview Protocol

In-depth, open-ended interview questions were used to explore perceptions of job satisfaction in women student affairs professionals. Interviews were conducted via Webex and were recorded and transcribed. The average time used for interviews was 46 minutes with the longest interview lasting 93 minutes and the shortest, 16 minutes. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed participants time to elaborate or share more of their experience. The interview protocol was directly aligned with the study's research questions. Tables 1-3 present the open-ended research questions aligned with each research question and the primary construct examined.

Data Analysis

The interview responses were analyzed using thematic coding. Braun and Clarke (2012) describe thematic analysis as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (p. 57). The data analysis process began with a critical analysis of the data followed by identifying codes. “Codes identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). Finally, the researcher identified themes based on responses to the individual interview questions. A theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). In addition to identifying themes for each interview question, overall themes for each research question were determined.

Results Pertinent to Research Questions

This study analyzed six research questions reflecting job satisfaction for women in student affairs.

Research Question 1: What Are the Perceptions of Women Student Affairs Professionals in Louisiana Public Higher Education Institutions Regarding Job Satisfaction?

Research Question 1 was analyzed through four interview questions. After analyzing data, the answers to this research question resulted in identification of two major themes

including *support* and *lack of care*. Additionally, themes were identified for each interview question. Table 6 provides a summary of the identified themes for Research Question 1 and Interview Questions 1-4.

Table 1
Research Question 1 and Interview Question 1-4 Themes

| Research Question | RQ 1 Themes | Interview Questions | Interview Question Themes |
|---|-----------------------------|--|---|
| RQ 1. What are the perceptions of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana public higher education institutions regarding job satisfaction? | Support Lack of care | IQ 1. Discuss your level of satisfaction with your current work. IQ 2. How does your perception of job satisfaction in student affairs differ from your male colleagues? What are the similarities and differences? IQ 3. How does your family life impact your work? IQ 4. How have emergencies such as COVID and hurricanes impacted your job satisfaction? | Average to above average satisfaction Lack of access to men Less worry as a male Supportive partner needed Childcare challenges Below average job satisfaction Isolation No handbook |

Women interviewed mentioned the importance of support in various ways including the need for support from administrative leadership, colleagues, and partners. Participant 1 felt support from colleagues was particularly important to women in comparison to men. She stated, “I think my female colleagues look more at support they are given at a position [rather than the compensation].” Participant 6 stated, “our administration evolved and there has been a lot more support in our area, and support for student mental health. When you have that, it changes the whole game.” Participant 4 referenced how helpful it was to have a supportive spouse when

considering the need to balance childcare and work. Participant 8 agreed, stating, “I have a very supportive husband” when acknowledging family-life challenges.

Another major theme that emerged from Research Question 1 was the perceived *lack of care* demonstrated from their institution. Participant 2 described an overall lack of care during COVID-19 from their institution. “I felt like there wasn't like a lot of opportunities for my job to care for their employees. I feel like they're doing it now, but during that time, it didn't [feel like it]” (Participant 2). Participant 8 went as far to say, “I absolutely despise most of our administration because I do not feel that they have the best interest of their employees, or the students at heart most of the time.” As shown in Table 1, themes also emerged for each interview question.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 1. *Support* was identified as a major theme of Research Question 1. This finding confirms research stating a higher education professional’s support from colleagues can positively impact job satisfaction (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021; Rosser & Javinar, 2007; Volkwein & Zhou, 2003). Participants also felt their administration often did not have their best interest in mind. This confirms research on perceptions of senior leadership, in which Bender (2009) states,

Perhaps staff who have minimal contact with their Chief Student Affairs Officers are making a long-distance judgment. Other staff may have unrealistic expectations of what the role of the Chief Student Affairs Officer should be. Nonetheless, a gap seems to exist between the entry level staff and the person in charge of student affairs. (p. 563)

Research Question 2: What Are the Perceptions of Leadership in Relation to Job Satisfaction from Student Affairs Professional Women in Louisiana?

Six interview questions were used to assess Research Question 2. Two main themes emerged when analyzing this research including the *importance of trust* and *unfair pay*. Trust was described as “very, very, very important” (Participant 1). Some participants even indicated this is a cause of turnover at a higher education institution. Participant 1 said, “if [trust] wasn’t there, I would probably leave.” Participant 4 agreed saying, “if I didn’t have a supervisor that I felt like I could trust, then I think my world as a professional would be totally different.”

Unfair pay was another aspect impacting job satisfaction greatly. Participant 4 referenced the pervasiveness of this problem through the student affairs field stating, “we’re like every other student affairs division in the world. We know that we are prone to be understaffed and

underpaid.” One participant said, “in my first position [in student affairs] I [should] have remained working at Chick-fil-A full time and made more money” (Participant 6). Participant 5 described the unfair pay at senior levels saying, “we have disparity from 230,000 dollars for a vice president all the way down to 115,000 [dollars].” Participant 4 agreed with this assessment, saying “I’m the lowest paid vice president.” Others mentioned external factors such as the impact of inflation. Participant 1 said, “we are still living with the same salary even though the rest of the world is going up.” Some have resigned due to the lack of pay saying, “if you’re going into student affairs, you’re not going to get rich” (Participant 4).

In addition to the two themes for the major research question, themes emerged for each interview question. Table 2 provides a summary of the identified themes for Research Question 2 and Interview Questions 5-10.

Table 2

Research Question 2 and Interview Questions 5-10 Themes

| Research Question | RQ Themes | Interview Questions | Interview Question Themes |
|--|-------------------------|---|---|
| RQ 2. What are the perceptions of leadership in relation to job satisfaction from student affairs professional women in Louisiana? | Trust Unfair pay | IQ 5. How does trust among co-workers and your supervisor impact your job satisfaction? IQ 6. What are your perceptions of the values of your organization? IQ 7. How does your supervisor impact your job satisfaction? IQ 8. What are your perceptions of the executive level leadership in your organization? | High trust among co-workers Unspoken values Lack of adherence to published values High supervisor trust Importance of flexibility Lack of unification Dominated by politics |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | | IQ 9. Have institutional financial constraints impacted your overall job satisfaction? | Low staffing Low resources |
| | | IQ 10. How has your institution, being in Louisiana, impacted your job satisfaction? | Lack of progressiveness Unique culture |

Summary of Findings for Research Question 2. Two themes were identified after assessing responses to interview questions supporting Research Question 2 including *trust* and *unfair pay*. Researchers and participants assert trust became more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. One study by Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska (2021) asserts that positive relationships at work increased job satisfaction during the pandemic (ramifications of COVID-19 were considered in the interviews), especially when employees believed they were trusted by their employer. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the demands of student affairs professionals. Student affairs employees are often first responders in crisis situations, and the COVID-19 pandemic was no different (Trueblood, 2021). This resulted in participants feeling they were unfairly paid given the expectations placed on them.

The participants believed they are paid unfairly bolsters research findings indicating many student affairs professionals are extremely unsatisfied with their pay (Lombardi, 2013; Oshagbemi, 2000). In the field of higher education, many employees are dissatisfied with their pay (Oshagbemi, 2000). In 2019, five percent of employees were paid below \$35,568; many of those having to attain higher levels of education to achieve these positions (Nadel et al., 2019). One of the main groups falling in this category with a salary below \$35,568 was student affairs (Nadel et al., 2019).

Research Question 3: What Are the Perceptions of Women Student Affairs Professionals in Louisiana Public Higher Education Institutions Regarding Motivation?

Research Question 3 was explored through five interview questions. The researcher identified two themes including *student impact* and the *benefits of flexibility*. Student impact was evident in responses to interview questions regarding motivation, salary, student interaction, and benefits. Participant 8 said, “it’s the students, I know I am genuinely making a difference in their

life. That is why I do what I do.” Participant 5 stated, “I know that it is important to make that impact for the students because someone did that for me and I’m sure that they probably had way more challenges than I have right now.” In addition, the need for flexibility came up repeatedly in interview answers. Participant 1 indicated, “flex time is the number 1 benefit that I feel impacts my job satisfaction.” More flexibility even increased job satisfaction with the added expectation of more work. Participant 7 shared, “the trade off, of course, is the assumption that you’re working as many hours a week as you need to make sure the job gets done. So, we do work more than 40 hours a week and that’s okay.”

Additionally, themes were identified for each interview question. Table 3 provides a summary of the identified themes for Research Question 3 and Interview Questions 11-15.

Table 3

Research Question 3 and Interview Questions 11-15 Themes

| Research Question | RQ Themes | Interview Questions | Interview Question Themes |
|---|----------------|---|--|
| RQ 3. What are the perceptions of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana public higher education institutions regarding motivation? | Student impact | IQ 11. What motivates you to do your job? IQ 12. Discuss your level of satisfaction with your current salary compensation? IQ 13. How does your salary impact your work motivation? IQ 14. What benefits do you receive as an employee at your institution (flex-time, parking, professional development, etc.)? How do these benefits impact your satisfaction with your job? | Students Having impact Overall low satisfaction Need to advocate for pay Concerns about value Motivation from other factors Professional development Campus environment |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | <p>IQ 15. How much of your time do you spend directly interacting with students? How does this impact your satisfaction with your job?</p> | <p>Student interaction has positive impact on job satisfaction</p> <p>Senior level SA professionals spend less time with students</p> |
|--|--|---|

Summary of Findings for Research Question 3. The researcher identified one primary theme from this question: *student impact*. While participants did not believe they were sufficiently paid, they still had positive comments to make regarding the flexibility allowed within their work and the satisfaction of participating in student impact. The importance of student impact to women student affairs professionals is well established in the research. Schuh, Jones, and Torres (2003) found, “caring underlies the fundamental mission of student affairs and of institutions of higher education” (p. 101). The benefits of flexibility expressed by participants were also found in the research. Beeny et al. (2005) found a flexible work schedule to be an incredibly valuable form of compensation for student affairs professionals. Cameron (2011) asserted, “the more autonomy workers have in creating their own schedule the more likely they are to be satisfied with their work environment. Supervisors who enforce strict rules such as when employees arrive and depart the workplace create tense environments” (p. 114). Equally apparent in the research is the low pay of student affairs professionals. In 2019, many student affairs professionals were working with a salary below \$35,568 with a requirement of master’s degree or higher (Nadel, Pritchard, & Schmidt, 2019).

Research Question 4: What Are the Perceptions of Women Student Affairs Professionals in Louisiana Public Higher Education Institutions Regarding Burnout?

Research Question 4 was assessed through four interview questions. Two themes were identified as *wearing multiple hats* and *excessive hours*. *Wearing multiple hats* was a phrase often used by participants to describe the trend of being tasked with more duties than their job description included. Participant 2 described this as a cultural issue within student affairs saying, “when you’re in student affairs, you’re supposed to be doing like 10 different jobs.” Participant 4

agreed indicated, “[in student affairs] we learn to do more with less, we’re just programmed that way, when somebody else expects that they are going to leave at 5 o’clock, we know that’s not necessarily what’s going to happen for us.” Participant 9 spoke about this issue saying, “I oversee [many different areas] that are massive that bigger schools would probably have five to seven people doing what one person is doing [here].” Participant 9 believed this was a problem specific to Louisiana universities saying, “we all have too many hats.” One participant found this issue most pervasive during COVID when she was working four jobs (Participant 1).

The impact of the excessive hours professionals were working was expressed by most of the participants. Participant 9 said, “I typically don’t even take a lunch.” Participant 8 also mentioned the lack of breaks saying, “I’m coming in 30 minutes to an hour early every day, working through lunches all to just get things done.”

Additionally, themes were identified for each interview question. Table 4 provides a summary of the identified themes for Research Question 4 and Interview Questions 16-19.

Table 4

Research Question 4 and Interview Questions 16-19 Themes

| Research Question | RQ Themes | Interview Questions | Interview Question Themes |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| RQ 4. What are the perceptions of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana public higher education institutions regarding burnout? | Multiple Roles Excessive hours | IQ 16. Burnout is defined as “to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources” (Freudenberger, 1974, p. 159). Describe feelings of burnout in your current position. | Students in crisis |
| | | IQ 17. Describe any feelings of physical exhaustion relating to your job. | Lack of sleep |
| | | IQ 18. Of your graduate cohort, how many of your peers remain in the student affairs field? | N/A |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|-----------------|
| | | IQ 19. What must remain or change in order for you to remain in the profession? | Salary increase |
|--|--|---|-----------------|

Summary of Findings for Research Question 4. Two themes were identified for this question as *wearing multiple hats* and *excessive hours*. Research also found student affairs professionals to be working outside their job description. Kinman and Wray (2014) studied student affairs professionals and found respondents were often performing tasks they considered unreasonable. The findings from this study are supported by previous research (Cameron, 2011) specifically indicating mid-level professionals are often asked to wear multiple hats and make difficult decisions regarding staffing and budgetary needs which increases stress.

Participants expressing frustration with hours worked is consistent with the research on this topic. Beeny et al.'s (2005) study found there was no need for student affairs professionals to work more than 40 hours a week, but this was inconsistent with what student affairs professionals actually worked. In fact, the majority of those studied were working more than 50 hours (Beeny et al., 2005). Women are also working more hours than their male counterparts to prove their value at work (MacAlpine, 2022).

Research Question 5: What Are the Perceptions Of Women Student Affairs Professionals in Louisiana Public Higher Education Institutions Regarding Productivity?

This research question was explored through two interview questions. The researcher identified one main theme as being *job satisfaction does not equal productivity*. Overall, participants who identified themselves as being highly satisfied with their job did not also feel extremely productive in comparison to their lower satisfied peers. For example, although Participant 2 described herself as “not satisfied,” she identified her productivity level at “90% during the academic year.” Participant 1 stated, “my level of satisfaction with my job is at a 7” but identified her productivity at 90%.”

Additionally, themes were identified for each interview question. Table 5 provides a summary of the identified themes for Research Question 5 and Interview Questions 20-21.

Table 5

Research Question 5 and Interview Questions 21-21 Themes

| Research Question | RQ Themes | Interview Questions | Interview Question Themes |
|---|--|--|---|
| RQ 5. What are the perceptions of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana public higher education institutions regarding productivity? | Job satisfaction does not equal productivity | <p>IQ 20. How much of your typical workday is spent being productive?</p> <p>IQ 20a. When do you feel most productive? What type of tasks or focus contributes to your sense of productivity?</p> <p>IQ 21. Is there anything else you would like to add related to job satisfaction of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana higher education institution?</p> | <p>High productivity</p> <p>Planning</p> <p>Need for Women leadership</p> |

Summary of Findings from Research Question 5. The researcher identified the theme, *job satisfaction does not equal productivity* based on participant responses. This theme was inconsistent with research on this topic. Research has found satisfied employees to be more productive (Bender, 2009). However, research suggests that participants’ responses indicating very high productivity could have been a result of women feeling as if they continually need to prove their worth (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2022). The responses to these interview questions also could have been driven by the positive relationship most of these women had with their supervisor. Burmicky et al. (2022) discovered, “working mothers appreciated supervisors who treated them as whole humans with responsibilities and lives outside the office walls. Participants perceived themselves as more productive and loyal workers as a result of this treatment” (p. 13).

Research Question 6: What Are the Differences in Perceptions Of Entry Level, Mid-Level, and Executive Level Women Student Affairs Professionals in Louisiana Higher Education Institutions Related to Job Satisfaction?

This research question was not answered by individual interview questions but by a comprehensive look at participants' responses across all interview questions. Table 6 illustrates the emerging themes identified in relation to the varying position levels including entry level, mid-level, and executive level of women student affairs professional and their expressions of job satisfaction.

Table 6

Research Question 6 Themes

| Research Question | RQ Themes |
|--|---|
| RQ 6. What are the differences in perceptions of entry level, mid-level, and executive level women student affairs professionals in Louisiana higher education institutions related to job satisfaction? | Multiple roles at lower levels More flexibility at higher levels Hesitancy to leave profession at higher levels |

Summary of Findings from Research Question 6. The researcher identified the themes, *multiple roles at lower levels, more flexibility at higher levels, and hesitancy to leave profession at higher levels based on participant responses.* The expectation for lower levels to occupy multiple roles was discussed by many lower-level participants. An entry-level participant said, “when you’re in student affairs, you’re supposed to be doing like 10 different jobs” (Participant 2). Mid-level employees, such as Participant 1, were experiencing this strain as well indicating, “right now I am just doing one job, but the last two years I was doing four jobs.” In contrast, no senior-leader expressed frustration with multiple roles.

The overwhelming majority of senior leaders were satisfied with the level of flexibility they were provided. However, this freedom came with the expectation that senior leaders would remain available for calls at all times. Senior leaders were not only satisfied with the flexibility associated with time, but the autonomy given to them to pursue initiatives they believed would have student impact. Entry level employees were least satisfied with the flexibility they were

provided. Senior leaders were the least likely to want to leave the profession as many were approaching retirement.

Entry level participants were much less satisfied and considering leaving the profession. When asked what must remain or change in order for you to remain in the profession, Participant 8 (an entry-level participant) declared, “to put it bluntly, feeling like someone gives a damn.” Participant 2 (an entry-level participant) has exited the field of student affairs since her interview. When asked what needed to remain or change to stay in the field, Participant 2 indicated more remote opportunities as a major need.

These findings support research on job satisfaction of student affairs professionals. New professionals and mid-level professionals are the least satisfied and senior level are the most satisfied (Cameron, 2011; Lombardi, 2012; Marshall et al., 2016). Unfortunately, this dissatisfaction leads to burnout. New professionals and women in student affairs have been found to have the highest burnout rates (Guthrie et al., 2005; Marshall et al., 2016).

Major Findings and Discussion

This study focused on women student affairs professionals in Louisiana at entry, mid, and senior levels. The researcher identified six major findings when considering all research questions and responses to all interview questions.

Major Finding 1: A Higher Sense of Value Results in Higher Job Satisfaction.

This study bolsters research indicating leadership plays an important role in the job satisfaction of student affairs professionals (Komives & Woodard, 2003; Lombardi, 2013; Rush, 2019). Similar to findings in this area, participants in this study did not feel valued and believed administration did not have their best interest in mind (Bender, 2009). Participant 2 described an overall lack of care during COVID from their institution. “I felt like there wasn't like a lot of opportunities for my job to care for their employees. I feel like they're doing it now, but during that time, it didn't [feel like it]” (Participant 2). Participant 8 went as far to say, “I absolutely despise most of our administration because I do not feel that they have the best interest of their employees, or the students at heart most of the time.” When asked what must remain or change in order for you to remain in the profession, Participant 8 poignantly stated, “to put it bluntly, feeling like someone gives a damn.” This finding is similar to findings in the area of student affairs. Participants in this study did not feel valued and believed administration did not have their best interest in mind (Bender, 2009). When asked what must remain or change in order for

you to remain in the profession, Participant 8 poignantly stated, “to put it bluntly, feeling like someone gives a damn.”

Major Finding 2: High Levels of Trust Result in Higher Job Satisfaction

Participants in this study echoed previous research stating that trust is a large component of job satisfaction. Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska (2021) found trust bolstered positive attitudes in employees and increased job satisfaction when an employee feels their supervisor trusted them. Participants discussed the impact on their job satisfaction when they perceived administration, supervisors, and co-workers trusted them. All parties were identified as important in the trusting relationship. Similar to research on this topic, many felt trust from their immediate supervisor and co-workers but did not feel administration trusted them (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2022). A sign of trust often discussed was flexibility. Participants discussed needing flexibility to care for elderly members of their family or children. The support given to them from their supervisor to tend to the needs of their families made them less likely to want to leave. Those in senior level positions had the most flexibility which is consistent with research saying those at the top of the institutional hierarchy had more flexibility (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2022). Those at entry-level, often falling in Generation Z, expect even more trust and are willing to leave a position if they do not sense trust by supervisors and leadership (Holopainen & Suslova, 2019). Major Finding 2 found high levels of trust result in higher job satisfaction. Trust was one of the most pronounced themes in all participant answers. Job satisfaction was impacted by trust among co-workers, supervisor, and senior level administrators.

Major Finding 3: Senior Women Student Affairs Leaders are More Satisfied Than Those at Entry and Mid-Level

The researcher found an overall sense of higher satisfaction from the women interviewed at senior levels. Senior-level participants did express frustration with facing lower pay and more scrutiny than their male counterparts. For example, senior level women had to negotiate more, secure more approvals, and accept much lower pay sometimes more than 100,000 dollars than males at their level. However, these discouraging elements were overcome by other factors contributing to higher satisfaction, such as the higher pay than previously experienced, the higher level of autonomy associated with time and projects, and the proximity to retirement. Senior leadership’s ability to have impact on students is supported by research indicating this is commonly expressed as a reward of being a senior leader (Hannum et al., 2015). In contrast,

entry and mid-level professionals expressed a need for fair pay, varying levels of autonomy, and intentions to leave the field if pay and perceived care from leadership did not increase. This finding indicated senior women student affairs leaders are more satisfied than those at entry and mid-level. Factors contributing to higher satisfaction at senior levels was the highest pay of their career, the higher level of autonomy associated with time and projects, and the proximity to retirement. Research has established this finding as a trend. Job satisfaction of student affairs professionals among new professionals and mid-level professionals are the least satisfied and senior level are the most satisfied (Cameron, 2011; Lombardi, 2012; Marshall et al., 2016).

Major Finding 4: Women Student Affairs Professionals are not Adequately Paid for the Expectations Placed on Them

Women student affairs professionals in this study are often working more than one role. Women are expected to say yes to everything including volunteering to serve on committees, attend leadership trainings, train new employees, and to make sure nothing falls through the cracks (MacAlpine, 2022). MacAlpine (2022) found “women have to work twice as hard to be perceived as half as good” (p. 124). This research found multiple roles to be most common at entry and mid-levels. Because of these added responsibilities, all levels are often working long hours. Cameron (2011) compares a student affairs professional lifestyle to a high-power corporate leader in regard to the intense, fast-paced environment. Beeny et al. (2005) said student affairs professionals work much more than the traditional 40-hour work week.

Participants at entry and mid-levels were very unsatisfied with their pay given the amount of work they contribute. Research indicates that pay discrimination does indeed exist in society as well as student affairs and women are often paid less than men for the same work (MacAlpine, 2022). Women at entry levels compared their compensation to jobs with much less education required to be employed at places such as Chick-Fil-A. Research finds that women in entry-level student affairs positions often are unable to even pay daycare expenses (Burmicky et al., 2022). Participants at senior levels were more content but were still frustrated by comparisons to male counterparts or other industries. One senior level participant described her overall loss of wealth due to the extremely low pay she received up until this point in her career. Many participants attempted to justify their low pay by sharing statements indicating their awareness this profession would not be a high paying field when they entered it.

This finding indicated women student affairs professionals are not paid adequately for the expectations placed on them. Although senior leaders were the most satisfied with their pay, they were aware they were not paid the same as others at their level. Those at entry and mid-levels felt they were not earning enough to live comfortably given the work responsibilities and the educational attainment needed to secure their position. This finding is congruent with research on pay in student affairs. In 2019, five percent of employees were paid below \$35,568; many of those having to attain higher levels of education to achieve these positions (Nadel et al., 2019). One of the main groups falling in this category with a salary below \$35,568 was student affairs (Nadel et al., 2019). “In comparison, a dean of students, who typically leads the student affairs department, had an average salary of \$105,255 in 2018-19” (Anderson, 2020, para. 3).

Major Finding 5: Women Student Affairs Professionals are Highly Motivated by Student Impact

This study assessed the impact of multiple variables on motivation for women student affairs professionals including compensation, benefits, advancement opportunities, and student interaction. The highest impact on motivation was not the amount of time spent with students, but the ability to impact their growth and college experience. Though some participants spoke about the burnout associated with meeting students’ many needs, the overall ability to have impact is what keeps them in the field. This matches the common reason student affairs professionals enter the field which is the opportunity to develop students (Taub & McEwen, 2006). Major Finding 5 indicated women student affairs professionals are highly motivated by student impact. This finding was consistent at entry, mid, and senior levels. Dissatisfaction also was generated from leadership directing participants to do things they believe did not have a positive impact on students. The importance of student impact to women student affairs professionals is well established in the research. Schuh, Jones, and Torres (2003) found “caring underlies the fundamental mission of student affairs and of institutions of higher education” (p. 101).

Major Finding 6: Crises Increased Burnout Among Women Student Affairs Professionals in Louisiana

The COVID pandemic is the major crisis explored in this research, however other crises such as campus shootings, sexual assaults, natural disasters, mental health, and food insecurity

also were found to increase burnout for women student affairs professionals. The height of the pandemic was hard on women student affairs professionals in Louisiana for a myriad of reasons. One reason was the politically charged environment that came along with COVID-19. “[Student affairs] employees are often responsible for coordinating quarantine housing and mask distribution and managing conduct hearings for students who break social distancing and other public health rules” (Anderson, 2020, para 2). Student affairs professionals felt that no matter what decision they made, students and parents were angry. This was especially difficult on Vice Presidents, having to be at the decision-making level. Another reason for increased burnout was the lack of a handbook or professional colleagues to utilize. Student affairs is a sharing profession, and it was intimidating for student affairs professionals to be creating solutions with no prior knowledge or experience.

Lastly, although some research suggests telecommuting increases job satisfaction, many professionals also felt isolated during this time and lacked student interaction which lowered job satisfaction. Abilash and Siju (2021) suggest there is an increase in job satisfaction with telecommuting but there is a decrease in job satisfaction if an employee spends too much of their time at work telecommuting. These issues compounded with women student affairs professionals taking on more during this period due to hiring freezes and layoffs lead to high burnout (MacAlpine, 2022). Echoing another major finding of this study, trust from the participants’ supervisors increased job satisfaction during the pandemic. Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska (2021) assert that positive relationships at work increased job satisfaction during the pandemic, especially when employees believed they were trusted by their employer.

Because this study happened shortly after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Major Finding 6 highlighted that the COVID pandemic increased burnout among women student affairs professionals in Louisiana. Although Louisiana also experienced multiple hurricanes during this time, the pandemic caused the most strain on student affairs professionals even in the areas highly impacted by recent hurricanes.

Based on prior research indicating satisfied employees tend to be more productive (Bender, 2009), the researcher identified productivity as a major construct in the initial conceptual framework introduced (see Figure 1); however, the findings did not support a link between productivity and job satisfaction. Most participants described themselves as extremely productive but, research suggests that participants’ responses indicating very high productivity

could have been a result of women feeling as if they continually need to prove their worth (McKinnon-Crowley et al., 2022).

Implications for Theory, Leadership and Practice, and Future Research

Implications of the research related to theory, leadership and practice, and future research are discussed in relation to this study's findings.

Implications Related to Conceptual and Theoretical Concerns

The researcher used Locke's (1969) work on job satisfaction to provide a framework for this study. Locke (1969) found that employees were most satisfied when their work matched their values. This was consistent in the results of this study. Participants valued student growth and their ability to impact students helped them remain satisfied. The researcher utilized theories to support all areas impacting job satisfaction including leadership, motivation, and gender. In relation to leadership, the researcher used Irby, Brown, Duffy, and Trautman's (2002) theory of synergistic leadership. Irby, Brown, Duffy, and Trautman (2002) identified four factors they determined most important to leadership success: (1) attitudes, beliefs, and values, (2) leadership behavior, (3) organizational structure, and (4) external forces. This study supported this theory. Factor (1), attitudes, beliefs and values, was supported by participants valuing trust and student impact. Factor (2), leadership behavior was important, as many study participants expressed some dissatisfaction with their job because of the perceived lack of care from senior level leadership. Factor (3), organizational structure was supported by this research as well. The structure of student affairs requires long hours, often leading to less satisfaction from employees if flexibility is not given to compensate for these hours. Factor (4), external forces was supported by this study specifically when participants were asked about working in Louisiana and the participants' perceptions of a lack of progressiveness within Louisiana, as well as a difficult culture adjustment for those from other areas.

Motivation was assessed in this study within the context of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) on internal versus external control. The researcher is unable to confirm that this theory is supported due to the lack of data collected on locus of control. The researcher also used the hierarchy of needs developed by Abraham Maslow (1958). This theory was supported by participants' discussion of pay. Women student affairs professionals in Louisiana desired a salary that would provide a comfortable level of living, thus allowing them to remain satisfied with their work.

In the assessment of the impact of gender on job satisfaction for women student affairs professionals, the researcher utilized the gender schema theory by Bem (1983) as a framework. The gender schema theory takes into account the information a person collects in the world along with their pre-existing schema to create their view of appropriate gender behavior (Bem, 1983). This theory was supported by the study's findings as evidenced by the women in student affairs participants' perceptions they had a different experience than their male counterparts.

The conceptual framework used in this study was altered to fit the findings from this study (Figure 1). The original framework identified productivity as a major construct. However, the findings do not support a link between job satisfaction and productivity. Job dissatisfaction did not lead directly to burnout, as suggested in the initial framework. Therefore, in the new framework, a crisis, such as a pandemic, was related to burnout based on participant responses. The revised framework places emphasis on trust and positional level as major indicators of job satisfaction level. Other important factors included in the revised framework are student interaction, workload, and salary.

Implications for Leadership and Practice

Higher education, along with the rest of industry, is dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher education professionals are leaving the field in large numbers (Lederman, 2022). Though all industries are experiencing mass exits, higher education has coupled this issue with inadequate pay for their primarily female workforce. In order to slow this trend, institutions will need to incorporate steps in order to increase job satisfaction for women in student affairs. One step will be to begin paying women adequately for the work they are doing starting with those at entry-levels. Those at the lowest pay are the most likely to leave the field (Pfeffer & Davis-Blake, 2006).

Senior leaders will also need to trust employees as they move to more flexible work schedules including some remote work opportunities. Though senior leaders may worry that productivity will be impacted negatively with more flexible options, research indicates that even adding some distractions at home does not decrease work performance (Abilash & Siju, 2022). This is critical at a time where levels of trust have decreased at higher education institutions. Professionals are experiencing less autonomy than they once had and increased surveillance (Lederman, 2022).

Large exits have left the women remaining in the workforce with a much higher workload, leading to burnout and ultimately turnover. Senior leaders will need to better prioritize the needs of the institution. The expectation that a smaller workforce can do what a much larger workforce was doing a few years prior is unrealistic and will end in more exits. It will also be critical that administration provides ongoing training to handle crisis situations so that higher education professionals are less prone to burnout when crises happen.

The largest motivator for women student affairs professionals in Louisiana to stay in the field remains the ability to impact student growth. Some professionals thought that senior level administrators did not have students' best interest in mind during the pandemic which decreased satisfaction. Moving forward, senior leaders will need to make it clear to their workforce that they value the student experience as well.

Implications for Future Research

This study provides opportunity for future research regarding job satisfaction of women student affairs professionals. Focus areas could include impact on job satisfaction with expanded regions, institution type, race, compensation, and mothers. This study only included a small sample of women from Louisiana's public higher education institutions. This study could be expanded to include more women from other regions. It would also be beneficial to include a comparison between private and public institution job satisfaction as this study only assessed public institutions. Another area of interest could be comparing satisfaction at historically black colleges and universities with primarily white institutions. This study also only assessed the impact of gender on job satisfaction. This study could be replicated to focus on the impact of the cross-sectionality of race and gender on job satisfaction in student affairs. The impact of compensation on job satisfaction for women student affairs professionals was a major finding in this study. Future research could look specifically at pay among similar student affairs positions to determine the level of pay penalty associated with being a woman in student affairs. This study intended to understand the impact of family and children on women student affairs professionals. Most of the participants had older children that required much less care or did not have children. This study could be replicated to determine impact on job satisfaction in student affairs for mothers of young children.

Conclusion

This phenomenological qualitative research study was designed to assess job satisfaction of women student affairs professionals in Louisiana at entry, mid, and senior level position. The data analyses resulted in identification of six major findings relating to a higher sense of perceived value and high levels of trust resulting in higher job satisfaction, the impact of the professional position level on job satisfaction, low compensation, and motivation due to student impact, and crises causing an increase in burnout. Thus, women student affairs professionals stress the importance of effective, supportive, caring, and trusting leadership for overall job satisfaction, especially during the critical entry and mid-level years. These professionals also struggled with misalignment between expectations and responsibilities not aligned with job compensation. Students remain as the primary motivational source for women student affairs professionals. Finally, the findings highlight the need to adequately prepare and address times of crisis in order to reduce women student affairs professional burnout.

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