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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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Learning Experiences of Financial Aid Administrators: A Phenomenological Study of
Workplace Learning

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Diana J. Sanders

February 2021

Dedication

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13.

My dad always told me I could do anything I set my mind to, and so I dedicate this to his memory. To my husband, Glendon, who has been by my side and offered constant encouragement and support when I thought the end did not seem to be in sight. Also, to my three children, Shelby, Leslie, and Trenton, who can also do anything they set their minds to! I love you all!

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I also want to thank my friends and colleagues for the support and reminding me that the end would soon be in sight. I now offer my support as they continue their educational pursuits.

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Abstract

This qualitative research study was designed to understand the lived experiences of leaders learning to lead within higher education, specifically within financial aid offices in the state of Oklahoma, and the role of formal and informal workplace learning on leadership preparation. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of leaders learning to lead. The sample consisted of five financial aid leaders from the state of Oklahoma who are members of the Oklahoma Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. The electronic interview consisted of 19 questions and resulted in six themes. The researcher coded interviews with three different coding passes (process, a priori, and emotion coding) to determine the themes that describe the processes of mentoring, formal and informal learning, and the role of professional organizations on the leadership development of financial aid administrators.

Keywords: workplace learning, mentoring, networking, financial aid, student affairs

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2018, Federal Student Aid (FSA), an office within the U.S. Department of Education (ED) processed over 18 million applications for student financial aid and over 10.4 million students received in excess of \$120 billion in federal student aid to attend postsecondary institutions across the United States (DeVos et al., 2019). Student loan debt is the second-highest in consumer debt in the United States, falling second only to mortgage debt. These astounding numbers demonstrate the need for effective leadership in the financial aid office.

Financial aid leaders are responsible for ensuring students receive accurate and clear information regarding the financial aid offers they receive to fund their education as well as information for when they graduate or leave their programs. Since students rely on and follow the expertise of financial aid administrators, it is crucial for financial aid leaders to understand the nuances of financial aid, to train staff on the numerous and varied eligibility criteria for federal, state, and institutional financial aid programs, and the criteria for remaining within institutional compliance, all while assisting students in achieving their educational goals (McGhee, 2015). Meeting these standards requires effective leadership skills in the financial aid office.

Due to the volume of funds passing through the financial aid office, effective leadership is crucial. Effective leadership is also vital in specialized service areas across postsecondary campuses to assist students in achieving their educational goals (Schuh et al., 2017). Specialized services beyond instruction have been incorporated into colleges and universities as they have expanded. Specialized areas include offices and personnel for student recruitment, admissions, student financial assistance, and processing tuition payments. These areas have become a standard part of higher education campuses, and usually these services fall under the division of

student affairs. The areas of student affairs are varied and complex. Leaders who can lead under these circumstances are necessary, but these are not always the leaders who are leading. Often, employees who have excelled in their positions are placed in leadership roles based on criteria not relevant to the leadership role, and often the leaders lack the necessary skills to lead (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). Leaders are often taught leadership skills after they have been promoted to a leadership position, and few institutions provide training to aspiring leaders (Hempsall, 2014). Research shows a link exists between successful institutions and effective leaders (Naicker & Mestry, 2016).

Workplace learning describes the activities and processes that occur within the context of the work environment (Manuti et al., 2015; Zhao & Ko, 2018). Understanding workplace learning and how leaders learn leadership skills will benefit higher education institutions in aligning workplace learning strategies within financial aid offices. Understanding how leaders learn leadership skills will benefit higher education institutions in supporting the training and development needs of the financial aid office. Financial aid employees who perform their jobs well do not automatically develop into effective leaders. Higher education institutions have a widespread practice for promoting employees to leadership roles who are regarded as experts in their field and have performed well within their division; however, the newly promoted leader may be unprepared as a leader (Morris & Laiple, 2015).

The Department of Education (ED) states that an institution must demonstrate administrative capability within the financial aid office, and this requires that institutions provide training and development for financial aid personnel. ED provides every institution that administers federal financial assistance to students an administrative cost allowance as an offset for providing assistance to students and is to be used for the training and development of staff to

ensure administrative capabilities are met; however, these funds are limited. If leadership training programs taught to newly promoted leaders or potential leaders alleviate the issues associated with ineffective leadership decisions, then more research will be needed to determine the most effective leadership activities, whether these activities are worth the investment (Seidle et al., 2016), and whether the limited funds are well-utilized.

Statement of the Problem

Effective leaders are crucial within the financial aid office; however, institutions of higher education are not training leaders to lead effectively (Nica, 2013; Parrish, 2015). Organizational effectiveness, in general, requires leaders to be prepared to lead the organization (Altbach, 2014; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Institutions of higher education are complicated organizations that require leaders to possess a competent leadership skillset, to understand the complicated landscape of higher education, and to possess leadership competencies for effective decision making (Altbach, 2014; Black, 2015; Hemsall, 2014).

The literature notes that the failure of organizations is due in large part to the failure of leadership (Holt et al., 2017). Specifically, higher education has a long-standing practice of promoting individuals who demonstrate excellence and achievement in leadership roles (Hemsall, 2014). Riley and Russell (2013) stated institutions may experience high turnover in leadership positions due to “ineffective and ill-prepared personnel” (p. 39), and the high turnover creates monetary issues to replace the employee. Followers who report to the leader or work with the leader face the ramifications of a poorly managed department, which can lead to low employee morale, high employee turnover, and burnout (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). Researchers also emphasize that leaders appointed to leadership roles within higher education, and specifically within financial aid, without the necessary leadership training and competencies

could potentially become problematic for the institution and create issues, including low follower morale or turnover, monetary losses, loss of institutional productivity (Leary et al., 2013; Shuck et al., 2015), or risk jeopardizing their own careers (Morris & Laipple, 2015; Pyc et al., 2017).

It is already well-known that effective leadership training programs continue to be necessary to address ineffective leadership behaviors that inhibit organizational success (Altbach, 2014; Patel & Hamlin, 2017; Seidle et al., 2016). Formal learning activities involve structured courses or programs. Formal learning activities are ineffective in meeting the needs of some leaders because the skills often cannot be aligned with their work environment (Gerken et al., 2016). Informal activities that provide for the learning needs of new leaders within the higher education sector align more closely with the career goals of leaders (Seidle et al., 2016). More research is needed to determine the most effective learning activities for leaders, especially within the financial aid office.

Purpose of the Study

Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of participants who have experienced a phenomenon (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences for leaders learning to lead within higher education, specifically within financial aid offices in the state of Oklahoma, and the role of workplace learning, both formally and informally, on leadership preparation. The following study examined leadership training in higher education and the importance of training leaders in the proper management and leadership skills needed to run the higher education enterprise (Nica, 2013). This study explored the lived experiences of financial aid leaders learning to lead, because training continues to be an essential element for institutional success and having leaders who are prepared to lead institutions is crucial (Riley & Russell, 2013).

Research Questions

Q1. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe their preparation to lead?

Q1a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the complexities of the various financial aid programs?

Q1b. In what ways does self-determination theory relate to learning leadership skills and the complexities of the financial aid programs?

Q2. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the skills needed for leadership in financial aid?

Q2a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe effective and ineffective leadership within the financial aid office?

Q3. In what ways do professional organizations contribute to the leadership training and development for financial aid leaders within the state of Oklahoma?

Q4. In what ways do the training and development needs of financial aid leaders differ from those of other areas in student affairs?

Q5. In what ways do formal and informal leadership training and development programs, such as mentoring, play a role in the leadership training and development of financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma?

Definition of Key Terms

Financial aid. Financial assistance offered to students in the form of scholarships, grants, work opportunities and loans for the purpose of offsetting the costs associated with attending an institution of higher education (Fuller, 2014).

Formal leadership training and development. Leadership training and development that is taught in a formal setting and facilitated by a formal instructor. Formal leaders are those that are appointed over a follower, referred to as the boss or supervisor (Manuti et al., 2015).

Informal leadership training and development. Informal leadership training and development does not occur at a set time and is not facilitated by an instructor. Informal leaders are individuals who hold no formal leadership role over an individual but are followed or trusted because of their knowledge or experience (Manuti et al., 2015).

Mentoring. Mentoring is a process in which an individual with more knowledge or experience guides an individual with less knowledge or experience (Bynum, 2015).

Workplace learning. Workplace learning describes the activities and processes which occur within the context of the work environment (Manuti et al., 2015; Zhao & Ko, 2018).

Summary and Preview of the Next Chapter

The introduction of this chapter includes the importance of financial aid leaders to be prepared to lead within higher education. The purpose of this study was to determine the learning experiences of leaders within the financial aid division in higher education and the preferences of these leaders to learn leadership skills. Chapter 2 provides the background and context for the research questions regarding formal and informal leadership training programs and the impact of mentors as an informal leadership tool.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review focuses on workplace learning, leadership, formal and informal leadership learning, theories for learning leadership, the history and overview of student affairs, the current state and complexities of financial aid, and issues for organizations when leaders are not prepared to lead. The literature review is designed to answer the questions regarding learning to lead within the financial aid office and the complexities of financial aid. After describing student affairs and the connection of financial aid within the student affairs division, the next steps involve describing the complexities of financial aid programs. The history and background of student affairs and financial aid are necessary to provide the context to frame the study, because it is within this context that financial aid administrators perform their job functions.

Steps in the literature review process involved searching the ACU library databases EBSCO and ProQuest. This literature review includes research articles from databases that offer insight into the various financial aid programs and how leaders learn to lead within the student affairs division and the office of financial aid. The research descriptors included *higher education, leadership, financial aid, student affairs, leadership training and development, formal and informal leadership development, workplace learning, and self-determination theory*. The searches returned numerous results that I reviewed to collect data from previous studies to guide this study. Higher education leadership remains a field with gaps in the leadership literature, especially regarding the way leaders prefer to learn leadership skills and the most effective avenues for new leaders learning to lead.

Student Affairs

Reviewing university websites and performing research in the library databases, the results revealed that the financial aid office in most institutions falls under one of two divisions:

enrollment management or student affairs (Lopez, 2017). For the purposes of this study, I described and studied the financial aid office from within the student affairs division. Schuh et al. (2017) described the student affairs division in detail; however, the departments located under this umbrella may vary by institution. Regardless of the areas that fall under the umbrella of student affairs, this division in higher education encompasses the functional areas that provide services and support to enhance the educational experience of students. The focus of the student affairs division remains on the student and the division was not created accidentally but was established with the student and their welfare in mind. Ciobanu (2013) stated that when students are supported and receive the services needed to be successful in their academic pursuits, the student learning experience attains a higher quality of success. Ciobanu (2013) stated that when students are supported in the academic environment, the dropout rate decreases.

Not all areas of the student affairs division existed in higher education from the beginning, but the areas and positions were created as the area of need developed. For instance, as colleges across the United States began to admit women, the Dean of Women was the first position created for the well-being of a set of students and became necessary to assist women in their educational pursuits (Schuh et al., 2017). It would not be long before the Dean of Men was also a necessary position on college campuses (Schuh et al., 2017).

As early as 1925, higher education institutions began to recognize the need to treat students as individuals with the founding of the Intercollegiate Council on Personnel Methods (Schuh et al., 2017). Walter Dill Scott pioneered the student personnel movement with the creation of offices that first existed for student discipline, but the duties evolved to include financial aid, counseling, career services, and graduate placement, to name a few (Schuh et al., 2017). The division of student affairs evolved based on the need to provide more specialized

services to students for their success in higher education beyond academics. Because the first higher education institutions were small enough that the faculty managed them (Altbach, 2014), specialized offices were not needed (Schuh et al., 2017). However, as institutions have expanded, the need to provide specialized student services beyond instruction has become necessary.

Three documents formed the groundwork for student affairs divisions as they emphasized the development of students and the establishment of students as human beings (Schuh et al., 2017). The documents include the Council of Student Personnel Associations of Higher Education (COSPA), Student Development Services in Postsecondary Education: Tomorrow's Higher Education Phase II: A Student Development Model for Student Affairs, and the Future of Student Affairs. The documents have provided not only a resource and guidebook for the profession of student affairs but have also provided significant insight to the establishment of student affairs as a profession. However, research suggests that even with this guidance, student affairs professionals may struggle in their assigned roles with some vacating within a few years of beginning their tenure in the field. In general, the field of higher education has a high employee turnover rate. Morris and Laipple (2015) found that as many as 20% of academic deans and department chairs vacate their position each year. A study by Dinise-Halter (2017) found that 60% of student affairs professionals leave the field within one to five years and research uncovered seven themes that emerged regarding challenges and support needed for new professionals in student affairs.

Individuals entering a career are expected to meet a set of criteria known as competencies. Schuh et al. (2017) described the necessary competencies for individuals entering the student affairs profession. Competency areas were created because of the combined efforts of College Student Educators International (ACPA) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher

Education (NASPA). The competency areas listed include personal and ethical foundations, values, philosophy, and history, assessment, evaluation, and research, law, policy, and governance, organizational and human resources, leadership, social justice and inclusion, student learning and development, technology, and advising and supporting (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; Schuh et al., 2017). Additionally, student affairs professionals must have a variety of skills to be successful in their roles, including the ability to collaborate with other offices on campus (O'Halloran, 2019), counseling skills (Stark & Weinbaum, 2018), customer service and interpersonal skills (Woolf & Martinez, 2013), to name a few. Dinise-Halter (2017) stated that the development of student affairs professions begins immediately upon entering their first roles within student affairs. As a result, individuals employed in the financial aid office require additional skills and knowledge to assist students in being successful in higher education.

Student Financial Aid

Higher education costs have increased significantly in recent decades and, in reaction, students have relied on student financial aid to assist in covering a portion or all costs associated with higher education. Financial assistance to students has a long and important history within higher education and within student affairs as the division responsible for student financial assistance. Billions of dollars are awarded annually to students in the form of waivers, scholarships, grants, work-study, and loans (Fuller, 2014). Even though the office of student financial aid did not exist in the earliest colleges and universities, the history of student financial aid can be traced back to America's first institutions of higher education and, specifically, to Harvard University, which offered the first scholarship in 1643 and student loans in 1838 (Thelin, 2011).

As higher education has expanded, financial assistance to students has also expanded. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the G.I. Bill, provided funding for higher education for military personnel returning from military duty as an opportunity to learn new skills for employment outside of the military (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Fuller, 2014). Financial assistance first began as subsidies to higher education institutions and later became portable, allowing students to utilize the award at any accredited institution they selected to attend (Fuller, 2014; Thelin, 2011).

In the beginning, financial assistance was a reflexive reaction. As a response to the United States falling behind Russia in space exploration, legislation was passed in 1958 titled the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which created funding in several areas, including scientific research and technical education (Thelin, 2011). The first federal grant program was called the Education Opportunity Grant Program (EOG), and later renamed the Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant (SEOG), and finally renamed to the Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant (FSEOG). It is currently still in existence; however, additional federal funding was required to meet the needs of additional student populations, including needy students (Thelin, 2011). Recognizing the importance of higher education and the development of the United States, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Economic Opportunity Act of 1965, which created aid for needy students known as Title IV Programs (Thelin, 2011). In 1972, the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG), later renamed the Pell Grant in 1980 after Senator Claiborne Pell, was created as an entitlement for students who met and retained eligibility requirements (Thelin, 2011).

How Is Student Financial Aid Awarded to Students?

The amount of financial assistance a student expects to receive from an institution is often a factor in selecting the institution of higher education they will attend (Heller, 2017; Woolf & Martinez, 2013). Misconceptions regarding how financial aid is awarded as well as how much financial assistance a student is eligible to receive is often a source of frustration for students and their families. Students are often instructed by parents or outside entities to contact the financial aid office to negotiate their financial aid offer and ask for additional funds to be awarded. Unfortunately, the financial aid office must adhere to strict guidelines and cannot alter how the federal and state aid is awarded, because the awarding criterion is not negotiable. Federal Student Aid (FSA) is an office within the U.S. ED. It processes student applications for federal financial aid funds. Financial aid administrators must follow the strict statutory and regulatory guidelines, which are often cumbersome and leave no room for negotiating.

Financial aid from the ED is based on a formula, and the formula utilized to determine the funding amounts of the federal, state, and some institutional aid a student will receive is a complex and lengthy calculation processed by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Students complete the FAFSA to apply for federal student aid funds known as Title IV financial assistance. Title IV financial aid programs are student aid that is funded by the federal government. Financial assistance is offered in the form of grants, loans, and work-study. The FAFSA has been revamped several times since its inception but is currently a 116-question application that asks about a student's household, including income, assets, number in household, and number in college (Dynarski & Wiederspan, 2012). Every student must complete the FAFSA to be eligible for Title IV aid and must be progressing toward a degree to remain

eligible. The FAFSA is also the application for financial aid in most states that also utilizes the student's eligibility for aid based on the expected family contribution.

The expected family contribution (EFC) is a formula used by the ED to determine a student's eligibility and amount for federal financial aid. The EFC number ranges from 0 to 999,999, with 0 being the lowest and means students are eligible to receive the maximum amount of student financial aid if all eligibility requirements are met. Eligibility requirements include database matches that are not associated with income. For instance, males are required to register with selective service, the social security number and name of the student must match with the Social Security Administration, and students must file taxes if they earned above the tax filing threshold.

Financial assistance falls under two categories: need-based aid and non-need-based aid. Additional requirements are in effect for need-based financial assistance. Need-based financial aid is awarded based on two factors: the EFC and unmet need. Need-based financial aid includes grants, work-study, scholarships, and subsidized student loans that are not accruing interest while the student is in school. Non-need-based financial aid is not awarded utilizing the EFC and can be awarded up to the cost of attendance. An example of non-need-based aid is unsubsidized student loans. These loans are accruing interest while the student is in school. Merit-based financial aid is awarded to incoming students based on their ACT score, SAT score, or high school GPA before entering higher education, or GPA from previous institutions for transfer students. Students must keep a certain GPA to continue receiving the financial aid award and requires the financial aid office to monitor the student's progress.

Student financial aid is divided into three categories: gift aid, loans, and employment. Gift aid is in the form of scholarships, grants, and waivers. In most cases, gift aid does not have

to be repaid by the student if the student upholds their end of the awarding criteria and continues to make progress toward their degree while attending school or after graduating. Loans do have to be repaid by the student and go into repayment status once the student graduates, ceases to be enrolled at least half-time, or leaves the institution. Loans consist of subsidized loans that are not accruing interest while the student is enrolled in school, and unsubsidized loans that are accruing interest while the student is in school. Employment programs called work study programs are awarded with federal funds to students with exceptional need or in some instances, through institutional funds. The students earn paychecks for performing jobs on campus.

Federal financial aid rules and regulations are in a state of constant change and the changes happen quickly (Fuller, 2014; Pingel & Weeden, 2017). The changes are intended to be better for the student and are most often intended to simplify the application process but are often barriers for students or create an administrative burden for the financial aid administrator. Even though the ED sets the requirements for the programs, the financial aid administrator is responsible for monitoring the success and eligibility of the student. Financial aid administrators must adhere to over 4000 rules, regulations, and guidelines put in place by the ED as well as rules and regulations set in place by each governing state and, finally, they must also adhere to the guidelines put in place by each institution for determining institutional aid. Sometimes these guidelines from each branch can come into direct conflict.

Some students may be selected for a process called verification, which requires the financial aid administrator to request additional documentation from the student to verify the information the student used to complete the FAFSA. The process can be complex because the financial aid administrator must request the proper documents needed to determine the eligibility of the student. In some cases ED has allowed the financial aid office to make the determination

regarding what documents are needed, but in some cases, the guidelines are clear, such as with determining if students are citizens of the United States, the first requirement of financial aid eligibility. However, when documenting special circumstances that can determine if a student may be eligible for additional aid, ED leaves the decision regarding what is needed to each institution.

Oklahoma Financial Aid Programs

State student financial assistance in some instances is as complicated and cumbersome as federal student aid. Individuals in Oklahoma have several options for earning credentials beyond high school. Oklahoma is home to 31 public colleges and universities with 20 branch campuses, including two land grant institutions that offer credentials ranging from certificates to doctoral degrees. Oklahoma also has several options for private colleges and universities, including for-profit and not-for-profit institutions. These institutions provide federal financial assistance to students and most offer state assistance in the form of grants and scholarships. Pingel and Weeden (2017) stated that state financial aid assistance comprises a large portion of states' overall budgets, emphasizing that financial aid leaders must also understand the intricacies of state financial aid programs. Oklahoma, like other states, sets the criteria for awarding the state-funded student financial aid. The complexities of awarding state financial aid funds are the same as awarding federal student aid; they require an initial application and require monitoring to ensure the student remains eligible for the aid they were awarded. However, each state financial aid program also has individual criteria that is program specific.

Financial aid programs within the state of Oklahoma are funded through state appropriations. Two specific programs—Oklahoma Tuition Aid Grant (OTAG) and Oklahoma Tuition Equalization Grant (OTEG)—are available for undergraduate students in the state of

Oklahoma. Both programs require that students be Oklahoma residents enrolled in an undergraduate program. The programs determine the need by the FAFSA and also have GPA components. The state grants have limited funding and are awarded to students on a first-come, first-serve basis until the funds are depleted for the award year. These grants are also awarded based on FAFSA information. OTAG is awarded based on the EFC and OTEG is awarded to students attending private institutions with an income below \$50,000.

Oklahoma's Promise is a need-based scholarship program for Oklahoma residents who graduate from an Oklahoma high school, have a family income of less than \$55,000, and meet certain academically related criteria, such as GPA and course completions in high school. Students must apply for the scholarship program in the 8th to 10th grades and must utilize the scholarship within three years of graduation from high school. Students must graduate from postsecondary education within five years. The Oklahoma State Regents also awards merit-based scholarships for students who score in the upper percentiles on college placement tests. The award amounts vary depending on where the student attends postsecondary education.

How Do Financial Aid Administrators Learn the Complexities of Financial Aid?

Financial aid administrators agree that financial aid administration is a complex phenomenon, and the rules and regulations change often. Leaders in the financial aid office are tasked with implementing the rules and regulations and ensuring they understand the details and complexities, that their staff are trained and can implement the changing regulations, that administration are notified and comprehend the impact of new and changing regulations, and finally, that the students who are receiving the financial aid comprehend the impact of their financial aid. As previously stated, the financial aid director or leader within the financial aid office is responsible for learning the complexities of financial aid and for the successful

implementation in the office and across campus. However, what are the most beneficial training options for learning the complexities of the financial aid programs?

Rules and regulations for student financial aid change quickly. Every time a new administration is elected, new rules and regulations that guide the practice of FSA come along with it and can often require a complete revamp of the financial office's policies and procedures. Financial aid leaders must learn the new rules and know how to implement them quickly, often with little notice. Learning new information can occur in several ways, including through webinars or colleagues who have already implemented the new rules. Leaders can learn the new information through formal or informal means and pass it along to subordinates or colleagues through formal or informal means, and in many cases, the new information can be learned from professional organizations.

Professional Organizations Financial Aid Organizations

Several options for joining professional financial aid organizations exist for financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma. The organizations are designed to support financial aid administrators in all aspects of the administration of financial assistance. The format is a supportive environment where collaboration occurs on policy and procedures as well as suggestions for best practices within financial aid. Benefits of membership of professional organizations include in-person trainings, including webinars and conferences, virtual trainings, Listservs, and collaboration with colleagues.

Federal Student Aid, an Office Within the U.S. Department of Education

Financial aid offices in the United States fall under the U.S. ED; therefore financial aid administrators must follow the rules and regulations established by the ED. Sometimes these rules and regulations may seem to conflict the rules and regulations established by the institution

and often, financial aid administrators may feel conflicted between serving the institution and the adhering to the federal guidelines set forth by the ED.

National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators

The National Student Financial Aid Council was founded in 1966 and was later renamed the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA). A membership fee is required to join, but with the membership fee several services are provided to the members. NASFAA provides support and training for the financial aid community as well as for students and is the advocate of the financial aid community on policy and procedural changes. NASFAA hosts several training opportunities for financial aid administrators throughout the year, including leadership training for financial aid directors, new directors, and aspiring directors. In addition to in-person training, the association also offers webinars, online courses, a Listserv, and a website filled with a wealth of current information. NASFAA is involved in advocating for institutions of higher education, the financial aid administrator, and students.

Southwest Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators

The Southwest Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators is the regional association for financial aid administrators. The association exists for the training and support of financial administrators from the Southwest region of the United States and includes the five states of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, New Mexico, and Louisiana. Members enjoy annual benefits, including in-person trainings, webinars, and Listservs.

Oklahoma Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators

The Oklahoma Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (OASFAA) was created as a support system for the financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma. Similar to the national and regional associations, an annual membership fee is required for each school

and corporate sponsor that decides to join. The benefits of membership include access to an online Listserv, discounts to annual training, and the opportunity to participate in an officer capacity and vote on official business. The services are less expensive than NASFAA and more personalized.

Workplace Training and Leadership Learning

Every job has a learning curve and a period of learning that accompanies the position, and it is important to invest in newly appointed student affairs professionals from the beginning of their first position (Dinise-Halter, 2017). Financial aid administrators are required to be knowledgeable in numerous areas, including some areas outside of the arena of financial aid and higher education altogether. For instance, financial aid administrators must have the knowledge to guide students in the areas of financial literacy as well as understand the complex intricacies of tax filing and if the student or the student's parents have filed their taxes correctly. Workplace learning has become an increasing focus of interest (Muybayrik, 2018). It is important to note that a one-size-fits-all approach to workplace learning does not exist (Manuti et al., 2015). Leaders in universities traditionally were instructional staff, but as universities have grown to become complex organizations, professional midlevel leaders with specialties in finance, marketing, and institutional research have been incorporated to address the complex needs (Altbach, 2014). The question becomes who teaches the professional staff the leadership skills necessary to lead complex organizations. Midlevel managers build relationships with colleagues and learn from each other (Franken et al., 2015), and Bui et al. (2016) expanded on that to state that knowledge sharing enhances the learning processes of individuals.

Financial Aid Administrators: Who Are They and What Do They Do?

So far the groundwork has described the student affairs divisions and the financial aid programs from the federal, state, and institutional levels, but before moving on to the training needs of financial aid administrators, it is important to understand the job functions of financial aid administrators and what they actually do in their roles. First and foremost, it is the responsibility of the financial aid officer to ensure that the student receives the amount of financial aid that they are eligible to receive. Previously, the officer described the complexities associated with the federal, state, and institutional financial aid programs. However, a financial aid administrator must also ensure that the rules and regulations are followed. Additionally, the financial aid administrator is responsible for the following:

- Present financial aid information to incoming and current students and their families.
- Assist students in completing the FAFSA annually.
- Verify students have completed the FAFSA correctly, and if not, requesting the documents needed and make the necessary changes.
- Understand the income requirements for tax filing and instructing students and/or parents to complete a tax return if they have not done so.
- Monitor satisfactory academic progress.
- Check the financial aid websites to ensure students have completed all additional steps for financial aid, including the master promissory note, entrance counseling, and that the documents are completed correctly.
- Construct a cost of attendance budget for students and monitor the awards that the student receives to ensure the financial aid does not exceed the budget.
- Report enrollment information to the necessary entities such as lenders to that the

student's loans do not go into repayment.

- Monitor changes in enrollment that could impact programs that are dependent on enrollment, such as being enrolled part-time for student loans.
- Ensure students meet the federal, state, and institutional guidelines for funds from each program they are eligible for and report the information to the required entities.

The duties listed above are some of the most basic job-related functions for financial aid administrators. If the rules are not followed per the ED guidelines, sanctions could be placed on the school. Annually, auditors request information pertaining to each area of financial aid to ensure the proper management of financial aid. The areas include student eligibility, enrollment reporting, cost of attendance, verification, and proper documentation of adjustments made to student files. NASFAA researchers have spent time exploring the question regarding the perceptions of the financial aid office on college campuses.

Leadership in Financial Aid

Even though studies have been conducted to determine the necessary skills needed for being a successful employee in the financial aid office, a competency model has not been compiled to determine the necessary skillset for working within the financial aid office, what is needed to be a leader in the financial aid office, or how the skills to work in the financial aid office should be learned. Woolf and Martinez (2013) compiled a list of skills composed from a survey of 508 financial aid officers. The research revealed that the competencies closely resemble the areas needed for the student affairs professional. The top five most important skills included the ability to provide a high level of customer service, to follow the rules and policies, to work effectively as a team, interpersonal skills, and self-direction. However, the most frequent skill utilized in the financial aid office is the ability to follow the rules and policies (Woolf &

Martinez, 2013). The list is essential because the financial aid office is responsible for determining student eligibility for institutional, state, and federal financial aid as well as interacting directly with students, faculty, and staff across campus.

Effective leadership in the financial aid office is essential for the institution, because in some cases, students base their enrollment decision on the financial aid offer they receive from the institution (Heller, 2017). In other cases, if a student has an issue with one office, such as financial aid, this can also influence their decision to enroll in the institution. Hudnett (2016) found that students who decided not to enroll in an institution stated they had issues with the financial aid process during their admission experience. Leadership in higher education requires management and leadership skills (Nica, 2013; Stefani, 2015) and working in the financial aid office requires a specialized skillset. Financial aid leaders must be competent in multiple areas (McGhee, 2015; Phillips & Baron, 2013). Financial aid administrators must balance the needs of the institution with the demands of state and federal requirements that can seem burdensome and may, at times, seem to conflict. Moreover, federal rules and regulations are complicated and change regularly, and financial aid administrators must be prepared to make changes quickly. During times of natural disasters of hurricanes or pandemics, the rules are modified, and the financial aid administrator must quickly adapt to a new set of rules.

Even though handbooks and websites exist with detailed rules and regulations designed to provide guidance and proper administration of student financial aid, stories of higher education administrators violating rules and regulations continually fill the news. In some cases, it is not clear if the administrators broke the rules due to poor judgment, inadequate training, or poor leadership skills. Financial aid administrators have been guilty of breaking the rules deliberately and committing financial aid fraud, resulting in prison time and sanctions for the

institution. For instance, at one institution a director mishandled student loan funds and cost the institution \$6 million (Siegel, 2019). At a separate institution, errors were found in 85% of the files of financial aid recipients (Chute, 2015). More recently in 2019, a for-profit institution was forced to close after it was discovered the institution had mishandled \$13 million, leaving thousands of students scrambling to figure out what to do. Institutions that mishandle funds or award funds to students who are not eligible face sanctions, such as monetary fines or loss of financial aid for the institution, regardless if the error was accidental or negligent. Leaders who can navigate the complicated landscape of financial aid are needed to ensure institutions are not faced with fines or sanctions.

Leadership Training and Development

Researchers have varied views regarding the functionality and effectiveness of leadership training programs for higher education professionals. Ruben et al. (2018) stated that, regardless of the position within the institution, the leadership skills needed remain the same. Collins (2014) argued that leadership training for higher education leaders will not be successful unless it is adapted to entail the distinct issues and individualistic culture found within higher education. Dinise-Halter (2017) emphasized that socialization into new roles is an important aspect of beginning a new position.

Leadership development is a continuous process. Leadership development is the process of the continued learning of leaders after they have been placed in the leadership position and is usually referred to as professional development. Development ensures the leaders remain up-to-date on the current functions of their job or that they develop new leadership skills. It is vital for institutions to understand how leaders learn leadership skills as well as understand the necessary skills required to lead specific departments. Compiling a list of necessary skills required for a job

will assist in orchestrating training and development programs. Training and development encompass the activities that prepare leaders for their leadership roles and are separate processes that describe job function preparation. The literature discusses ways in which individuals learn within a higher education context. Understanding how financial aid leaders learn leadership skills will benefit institutions, especially executive-level leadership responsible for directly overseeing the financial aid office.

Training incorporates the activities used to describe the learning process for a new job or position. The literature provides positive as well as negative support for leadership development programs. Seidle et al. (2016) argued that leadership development programs are beneficial for organizations. Gerken et al. (2016) emphasized that formal leadership programs alone are inefficient for higher education and addressed the issue that training an individual for an institution of higher education needs to consider that higher education does not function in the same way as other organizations.

Higher education degrees or formal educational training and preparation for employment provide “soft” skills and general knowledge for employment; however financial aid administrators require financial-aid-specific training and development. The ED offers online training for the beginning, advanced, and novice financial aid professionals at no cost to participants. The courses provide the foundation for the financial aid process as well as advanced concepts beneficial for financial aid leadership. The training can occur anywhere an individual has access to an Internet connection. This type of training can be mundane since participants are required to sit in front of a computer screen for hours with no direct interaction with the trainer.

The ED also offers a week-long conference once per year that is free to participants and focuses on financial aid. Sessions are included for all aspects of financial aid, from the student

application process to how to assist student borrowers after graduation. Webinars are also available several times per year on specific processing updates and training on new functions of tED websites. The conference is beneficial, but the information is presented at a fast pace in one-hour increments with a fifteen- to twenty-minute window for asking questions regarding the content. NASFAA also offers several types of training for financial aid professionals, including in-person conferences, online credentialing courses, and on-demand webinars.

Financial aid rules and regulations fall under two categories of governance within the law: statutory and regulatory. Statutory rules and regulations are legislative laws that fall under the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) and are enacted by the government to dictate the activities of agencies. Regulatory rules are enacted as requirements by a government agency such as the ED. In fact, financial aid administrators are expected to follow these guidelines to ensure the institution is not in violation of either set of guidelines. Conferences and webinars directly from these sources provide vital information for understanding and applying these rules at the institutional level.

Professional Development

Riley and Russell (2013) asserted that the role of professional development on the preparation of leaders with no prior leadership experience is required for learning the vital skills necessary for being successful within higher education leadership. Black (2015) emphasized that leaders must possess a variety of leadership competencies to be effective among the competencies, including good judgement and effective planning skills. Formal educational programs designed to meet the needs of the institution would incorporate these skills.

Professional development activities are necessary to meet the needs of individuals to continue learning job-required functions and to learn new skills. Nica (2013) emphasized that

learning to lead as a form of professional development is not readily accepted by those who have been in leadership positions for an extended period. Wegner (2018) stated that professional development is necessary for the organization as well as for the individuals; however, it is not known what method of development individuals prefer. Until it is known what method financial aid administrators prefer, professional development will not be beneficial or effective.

Professional development for financial aid administrators can occur in several ways. Research by Peterson (2017) discussed credentials as a form of professional development for financial aid administrators and the importance that financial aid administrators hold credentials. Peterson (2017) stated that 70% of administrators surveyed replied that a need for a financial aid credential exists, and 82% stated that the financial aid credential would increase the respect of financial aid administrators who held them. Credentials are subject-specific and require that financial aid administrators attend a formal course, complete homework, participate in discussions, and pass a timed exam. The credentials encompass all areas of the financial aid administration process but are costly. Institutions may be unwilling to fund tests for subject-related content that they feel the administrators should already know without the need for a paid professional credential.

Types of Leadership Preparation

Unprepared leaders inhibit the progress of the organization (Morris & Laipple, 2015). Ineffective leaders impact productivity as well as morale and become a detriment to the organization, whereas effective leaders must be quick thinking, proactive, and skilled in conflict management. Organizational effectiveness encompasses leaders who are prepared to lead the organization (Altbach, 2014; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Shuck et al. (2015) discussed the impact that dysfunctional leaders have on followers, including withholding information and incivility,

which also creates low employee morale and burnout. Leadership preparation occurs in several ways in the form of training and development. Leadership training and development can occur formally or informally, and both options have pros and cons. Manuti et al. (2015) argued that formal and informal learning coincides in the working environment.

Informal and Formal Leadership Preparation

Formal and informal leadership can both be beneficial for new and seasoned student affairs professionals. Formal learning activities involve structured courses or programs. Formal learning activities are ineffective in meeting the needs of some leaders, because the skills often cannot be aligned with their work environment (Gerken et al., 2016). Informal activities that provide for the learning needs of new leaders within the higher education sector are designed to align more closely with the career goals of leaders (Seidle et al., 2016). Arguments about informal and formal leadership training fall on both sides, pro and con. Informal leadership training and development does not follow a strict regime or set of criteria. Researchers have found several benefits of informal leadership training and development. Manuti et al. (2015) stated informal leadership is more flexible and adaptable than formal leadership. Gerken et al. (2016) emphasized that employees who are open to informal development, such as feedback, become colleagues who are more valued as employees. According to Dyjur and Lindstrom (2017), instructors rely on informal development to improve their teaching skills, because most have not completed a formal leadership training program.

Formal leadership often takes the form of classes with a set agenda and can occur in person, online, or a combination of both. Formal leadership involves organized, structured learning and can occur one-on-one or in a group setting. Formal leadership training does have some negative impacts. It can be an issue for the trainer and the trainee when there is not a

connection (Ismail et al., 2017). Gallant (2014) stated formalized leadership development programs were preferred over experience for learning leadership. Higher education, specifically financial aid departments, has limited funding and resources available for training and development and the funds must be expended sensibly. Seidle et al. (2016) stated it is important to understand if the investment in formal leadership training programs is worth the monetary investment.

Mentoring

Many institutions do not have a formal mentoring program even though the current literature reveals that leaders benefit from them. More research is needed pertaining to the success and failure rates of formal mentoring programs. Numerous institutions offer a mentoring program for new faculty and staff (Carr et al., 2015; Reed, 2015). Although mentoring can be formal or informal, in informal leadership, the mentee usually seeks out someone they admire or have learned from previously to continue to train them and allows the mentor and mentee to choose to prepare an individual. Bynum (2015) stated that informal mentoring has benefits, including increasing leadership development as individuals create relationships with others.

Mentorship leads to a positive experience for learning and has been proven effective in various contexts, including newly tenured professors and student leaders learning to lead within an educational environment (Gray, 2018; Weijden et al., 2015). Mentoring programs or one-on-one mentoring can be useful for leaders desiring feedback and guided direction toward leadership development within higher education. Adults often have issues with structured or guided learning development (Klinge, 2015); however, mentoring may be the answer to alleviate the issues with such an environment. In the research by Dinise-Halter (2017), mentoring was found to be beneficial in the development of new student affairs professionals. Burstein and

Kohn (2017) found in their research that midlevel leaders, who participated in a leadership development program that incorporated mentoring, experienced benefits including immediate feedback and growth in development as a leader. Cherrstrom et al. (2018) found that peer mentoring was beneficial in assisting adult learners and helped build a network for sustained learning for the future.

Mentoring in Professional Organizations

Mentoring within professional organizations is also a consideration. Mentoring within professional organizations such as student affairs organizations has proven to be effective with providing development with everyday job functions but also as a leadership training tool.

According to Seeto (2016), most professionals enrolled in these programs primarily participated in conferences, workshops, or consulted an online database with questions.

Effective and Ineffective Leadership: What Happens When Financial Aid Leaders Are Not Prepared to Lead?

Organizations that expect to be successful must be led by a strong leader (Phillips & Baron, 2013), and organizational effectiveness encompasses leaders who are prepared to lead the organization (Altbach, 2014; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Leadership effectiveness correlates to the success of an organization, and lack of preparation creates ineffective leadership and results in issues for the institution (Northouse, 2016). Altbach (2014) emphasized that universities are complex and require a leadership structure that supports the complex operations, and stressed that administrators need training in their specified roles to be successful. The institution suffers due to poor leadership from leaders who are not prepared to lead (Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016). Batagiannis (2011) emphasized that leaders who excelled successfully identified problems and resolved to improve processes within the institution.

Knowing how to lead effectively can eliminate issues for the organization, including, but not limited to, employee burnout and turnover, decreased employee morale, and inhibited progress of the organization (Morris & Laipple, 2015). The literature noted that the failure of organizations is due in large part to the failure of leadership (Holt et al., 2017). Ineffective leadership traits include characteristics such as bullying, overmanaging, and the inability to build a team (Morgan & Manganaro, 2016). This list of attributes is associated with ineffective leaders and describes their specific traits and not their particular impact on the organization or their followers within the organization. These characteristics would undoubtedly create ineffectiveness, but not every ineffective leader would display these exact characteristics. It will be essential to structure a list of the most common traits of leaders considered useless and the distinct impact of the traits on organizational effectiveness. Decreased morale can be a result of a leader's ineffectiveness and impacts everyone with whom the leader works (Morris & Laipple, 2015).

As previously stated, financial aid leaders are required to be knowledgeable in current institutional, state, and federal financial aid policies. Financial aid directors who are not knowledgeable of the rules and regulations in any one area can create issues for their institution. Financial aid directors must also have leadership skills to lead the financial aid office, and since there is no formal financial aid training before being hired as a financial aid director, the training must occur on the job. Collins (2014) stated that many colleges and universities do not offer leadership training programs even after the individual is promoted to a leadership role, which can lead to employee turnover. Often faculty are promoted to department chairs based on exemplary teaching or research and not because they have proven themselves as leaders or administrators (Riley & Russell, 2013). The same is true for financial aid administrators who have been in their

roles for several years with the same institution and are often promoted by default, meaning they have “done the time” and the institution promotes them out of obligation or because the institution does not want to bring in an outside candidate who may not uphold the values of the organization. The newly appointed leader must initiate their growth and seek training opportunities through communities of practice through their professional organizations or seek the counsel of colleagues regarding leadership advice.

Administratively Capable

The ED states that any institution that disburses federal financial aid to students must be administratively capable. This means financial aid administrators must be adequately trained, the financial aid office must be adequately staffed, and the software must meet the minimum requirements for disbursing financial aid to students. Any one deficiency in these areas will render the school administratively incapable. Schools that are deficient in these areas also face fines and sanctions and are at risk of losing all title IV federal assistance it offers to students.

Theoretical Framework Discussion

The theoretical framework for this study was self-determination theory. I selected self-determination theory to understand the motivation of leaders to learn leadership skills in the absence of leadership training programs and the motivation for financial aid administrators to seek new knowledge for job-related skills. Numerous studies have determined the effectiveness of self-determination theory in a leadership context, as self-determination theory describes the manner in which individuals perform in various settings (Beck & Davidson, 2019).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) emphasizes the reasons individuals perform tasks based on the motivators of intrinsic or extrinsic factors (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Individuals who complete tasks for outward rewards compared to individuals who perform tasks for inward gratification do not perform as well (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Researchers agree that several positive aspects of self-determination theory continue to be beneficial within the work environment. Positive aspects include competence, autonomy, employee satisfaction, and less desire for employees to leave the organization (Decker & Van Quaquebeke, 2015; Guillaume & Kalkbrenner, 2019), which are all important within the financial aid office for individual development as well as to reduce workforce turnover. Financial aid leaders must be willing and motivated to learn leadership skills as well as the other job-related functions of their positions.

Summary

Effective leadership is essential in higher education and specifically, within the financial aid office. As higher education has evolved, so has the need to provide services to students in specialized areas. Financial aid is complex and financial aid leaders are required to have effective leadership skills. Formal and informal leadership preparation can benefit leaders in higher education to prevent the outcomes of ineffective leadership. This chapter provided literature on higher education and the importance of effective leadership, the impact of ineffective leadership, and an overview of formal and informal learning for leadership. However, the most beneficial training and development methods for financial aid administrators is not known. Chapter 3 provides the research methodology and information about participants.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the learning experiences for leaders learning to lead within higher education, specifically within financial aid offices in the state of Oklahoma, and the role of learning activities such as mentoring. This chapter will describe the details of the study, the design and methodology, describe the setting and sample, explain how trustworthiness, rigor, and reliability were established, describe the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and describe the researcher's role.

Population

The population selected for this study was midlevel financial aid leaders from the state of Oklahoma who are members of the Oklahoma Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (OASFAA). The association has around 300 members from all sectors of the state of Oklahoma as well as vendors. Only midlevel financial aid leaders were selected to participate in the study. Midlevel leaders are described as department heads who manage the daily operations of the departments and who hold the title of director, associate director, assistant director, coordinator, or manager within the financial aid offices from across the state of Oklahoma.

Sample

I used purposive sampling for the selection of the participants for this study. Purposive sampling is described as selecting participants based on their position or ability to provide information regarding the phenomenon being studied (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Participants were leaders in financial aid offices across the state of Oklahoma who had experience in the various institutional sectors within higher education. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Abilene Christian University (ACU), I began recruiting

participants. Selected participants were members of OASFAA within the state of Oklahoma. They consisted of midlevel leaders at the divisional level who are directors of financial aid or a similar title which lead the financial aid office, such as associate or assistant director or coordinator. The individuals were selected based on their leadership title and not by timeframe in the leadership position. Five participants agreed to participate in the study, and biographical data was not collected from the participants. Keeping the number to five participants allowed a thorough interview and follow-up process with each participant. Participants were recruited from each sector within the OASFAA organization: four-year public, four-year private, two-year public, career technology center, and graduate-level institution. The rationale for selecting participants from the various sectors was to understand the entire association's learning experiences and understand the training and development needs and preferences from all sectors included in the OASFAA. Saturation or concluding the research is reached when no new information can be uncovered was important (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Saturation was accomplished with the five individuals in terms of learning preference and understanding mentors' roles in training and development.

Participants were selected based on their titles from a database of lists of personnel from the OASFAA from the membership directory. Since not all schools in Oklahoma are members of the OASFAA, it was important that a membership directory list was pulled from the OASFAA database. An email was sent to selected participants who met the selection criteria of a leader of the financial aid department. In the email I described the study, the reason for conducting the study, how the information would be utilized, and how their information would be protected. This information was also explained thoroughly when the participants agreed and signed the consent form. Consent must be received by anyone who will be a participant in a research project

(Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Researchers must ensure the participants understand what is being studied and what will be done with the information. Consent was completed with a written document provided to each participant explaining the study, the importance of the findings, and what will be done with the findings.

Research Design and Methodology

I utilized qualitative research to conduct the study. Qualitative research is appropriate when the goal of the research is to understand an individual's lived experience. Qualitative research was the appropriate design and was selected because it does not involve experiments on participants but instead relies on interviews and participants' words and lived experiences (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). In understanding the experiences for learning leadership within the financial aid office, it is essential to understand the leaders' experiences, their selections for their growth and development, the process of human interactions, and participant actions (Saldana & Omasta, 2018).

I conducted the research using a phenomenological approach. This approach was appropriate for the data collection based on studying the phenomenon of leadership and understanding the experiences of individuals developing as leaders. Phenomenology is a way to understand social reality and the relationships among individuals from their perspective (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Leadership is a relationship among individuals. The phenomenological approach considers participants' lived experiences in the study, and this study focused on learning experiences. It was not focused on the effectiveness of any one leadership learning program. The study was limited to members of the OASFAA located in the state of Oklahoma.

Research Questions

Saldana and Omasta (2018) suggest that three to five research questions should be posed in a study, and this study focused on five questions with subquestions designed to learn about the leadership learning experiences of financial aid leaders in Oklahoma. Mayer (2015) emphasized the importance of formulating research questions from the beginning of the project to keep the researcher focused on the data collection process. The phenomenological approach begins with data collection and the posed questions (Saldana & Omasta, 2018).

The following questions guided the research study:

Q1. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe their preparation to lead?

Q1a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe the complexities of the various financial aid programs?

Q1b. In what ways does self-determination theory relate to learning leadership skills and the complexities of the financial aid programs?

Q2. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the skills needed for leadership in financial aid?

Q2a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe effective and ineffective leadership within the financial aid office?

Q3. In what ways do professional organizations contribute to the leadership training and development for financial aid leaders within the state of Oklahoma?

Q4. In what ways do the training and development needs of financial aid leaders differ from those of other areas in student affairs?

Q5. In what ways do formal and informal leadership training and development programs, such as mentoring, play a role in the leadership training and development of financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma?

Data Collection Instruments Procedures and Analysis

The study allowed me to develop an understanding of leaders' experiences and perspectives by conducting interviews, because the most common method to receive information from participants in qualitative research is the interview process (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). The survey instrument used to collect the data was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility and adjustments, if needed, as the interview is conducted. Semi-structured interviews were the best method for collecting information regarding leadership. As Saldana and Omasta (2018) stated that with interviews, responses can be analyzed immediately and follow-up questions asked if needed.

I conducted the interviews at a time selected by the participants and from a location that allowed them to feel safe and secure to speak freely. All interviews were conducted via electronic methods due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked participants what platform they preferred from a selection, including Zoom, Skype, or another platform they suggested. All participants selected the Zoom option. I recorded the interviews so they could be transcribed after I completed the interviews.

The survey instrument was a 19-question interview with open-ended questions designed to answer the research questions regarding leading within the financial aid office. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to speak freely regarding their leadership roles, their preparedness for the leadership role, and their perception of their leadership effectiveness and allowed participants to describe the phenomenon under inquiry—their own leadership

development (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). The interview questions were designed to answer the central research questions. The recorded interviews were uploaded into the Dedoose software and then transcribed manually. Transcribing manually allowed for the familiarity of the data. All filler words and phrases such as “um,” and “you know” were removed from the transcribed data resulting in 27 pages of single-spaced transcripts.

I transcribed all transcripts while listening to the recordings. Then I verified and coded the transcripts to determine leaders’ common themes using three coding passes. The software Dedoose was used for the initial transcribing and coding of the interview transcripts. Dedoose is a web-based platform that does not require an installation on a computer and makes the software convenient and easy to access. The transcripts and the codes from the three coding passes were exported into Excel for further analysis. Lofgren (2013) explains the benefits of reading through all transcripts and taking notes regarding overall thoughts, then rereading each transcript separately, labeling the transcripts with the coding that best describes the action, interaction, and reaction of the participants utilizing process coding. I conducted three coding passes on the interviews. After I verified the transcripts, I analyzed them using a phenomenological approach.

I conducted the first coding pass with process coding, which I used to identify the “participant action, reaction, and interaction” (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p. 126). Process coding was selected based on the need to understand the leadership experiences of leaders in the financial aid office (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Saldana and Omasta (2018) explained that process coding can be used on all forms of qualitative data and the researcher looks for action words ending in “ing” (p. 126). The coding pass was beneficial for determining the ways in which leaders learned leadership skills and the ways in which they continue to learn by looking for action toward learning.

I utilized a second coding pass with predetermined coding or a priori coding. A priori coding involves utilizing codes that already exist with an analytic inductive process to learn as the interviews are being conducted (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Induction involves creating open-ended questions through analytic inquiry to get a better idea of the learned experiences. During this coding pass I listened for leadership, leadership training, and terms associated with types of training the participants experienced and the categories of informal and formal learning activities and mentorships. I listened for times when the participants participated in learning activities and the ways in which they learned skills from certain forms of leadership training opportunities, both formally and informally. The last a priori code utilized was financial aid organizations, such as OASFAA, NASFAA, and the Southwest Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (SWASFAA).

Finally, I conducted a third coding pass utilizing emotion coding. Saldana and Omasta (2018) stated that emotions exist in all aspects of human life and it is expected that emotions would exist in leadership learning as well. Saldana and Omasta (2018) explained that emotion coding is appropriate for all forms of qualitative inquiry, but especially when a researcher wants to learn about the relationship of participants or the decision-making processes. In seeking to understand the leadership learning experiences of financial aid administrators, it was important to understand the emotions they attached to these experiences.

Methods for Establishing Rigor, Trustworthiness, and Reliability

Trustworthiness was completed through credibility or providing data that demonstrated the research was thorough and applied in additional contexts (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Saldana and Omasta (2018) listed several ways to establish credibility, including remaining professional. Because I interviewed colleagues from my own professional association, remaining professional

was of the utmost importance. I offered the interviewees the opportunity to review the transcripts after the interviews to establish trustworthiness that I transcribed their words accurately.

Confidentiality requires protecting the information that participants revealed and was of the utmost importance. Saldana and Omasta (2018) explained the importance that participant confidentiality remains intact and that all information regarding the participants remains confidential. Anonymity means not sharing the names of participants. Participants were not in the same location at the same time and interviewed separately so that only their thoughts and ideas were heard at one time.

Trustworthiness was established through credibility, and credibility was established through the researcher's thoroughness, demonstrated work ethic, and attention to detail in conducting the research (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). I was thorough in recruiting participants, creating the research study's design, and demonstrating a thorough investigation into the phenomenon of leadership.

Ethical Considerations

Data collection did not begin until I received approval from ACU's IRB. Ethics was established through ethical boundaries, as explained by Saldana and Omasta (2018). Saldana and Omasta (2018) explained any qualitative researcher working with human subjects must adhere to strict guidelines. Participants were selected from the OASFAA directory based on their title of director, manager, or coordinator of financial aid at their institution. I sent all participants an email explaining the nature of the study, how the information would be used, and how their information, including their identity, would be protected. Confidentiality was ensured while I recruited participants, conducted the interviews, and compiled the data. All information was de-identified that could reveal the identity of the participants. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stated

that participants' demographic information can be created from a participant profile and placed in a matrix and labeled with pseudonyms to keep the participants anonymous.

Consent forms were required of all participants before I interviewed the participant. The form described the study, what the researcher hoped to learn, the participant's function in the study, and how the information would be utilized (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Participants understood they could withdraw from the study at any point in time for any reason without repercussions to them or the OASFAA organization.

Assumptions

Examining the learning preferences of learning leadership in higher education requires recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach to learning or leadership does not exist. My assumptions were that participants were leaders who understood the requirements for leading a financial aid office and demonstrated leadership within the financial aid office at their institution. In addition, they participated in leadership learning during the course of their tenure as a leader in the financial aid office.

Limitations

Limitations are described as weaknesses that are beyond the researcher's control, and Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stated that no research study is without limitations. Limitations that were a factor on the study's validity or reliability included the length of experience of participants in the financial aid field, because the study was not limited to a length of employment in the financial aid field. Financial aid administrators who have been employed for a long time before becoming leaders in the department may have preferences that differ from new financial aid administrators, and leaders who are employed at institutions with a restricted or

limited travel budget may not have experienced training and development outside the state of Oklahoma.

Participants answered all questions, but participants may not have been honest regarding their own learning preferences if they were different from the methods in which they were trained to lead. I took steps to ensure that participants were comfortable discussing their own training and learning style when learning to lead to encourage participants to be honest during the collection process.

Delimitations

Delimitations of a study are the confines put in place by the researcher (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). The study was limited to financial aid administrators who are leaders within the department of financial aid within the state of Oklahoma and are members of the OASFAA. A better understanding of the training needs and preferences of financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma was the goal of the study and the boundaries of the study were limited to members of the OASFAA, because this is the association responsible for training financial aid administrators in the state. The study focused on available training opportunities for OASFAA members, the preferences for training, and the most beneficial training types from formal and informal training opportunities. I did not include financial aid administrators outside of the OASFAA, including those from the state of Oklahoma, since they are normally not involved in the training provided by the association, even though they may attend as nonmembers. In addition, the study did not focus on the pros and cons of each type of training the participants listed as their preference.

Researcher Role

My role and biases were important to the integrity of the study. I am a financial aid administrator with 14 years of financial aid experience, mostly in the state of Oklahoma at various institutions across the state. I began as an entry-level financial aid administrator and am now at the midlevel management level as a director of financial aid within the financial aid department. During my financial aid tenure, I have had the responsibility of training and being trained on the changing rules and regulations of financial policy and procedures.

My perspectives, feelings, and opinions are known as subjectivity, and Saldana and Omasta (2018) state that in qualitative research, it is almost impossible to avoid. However, even though subjectivity can be a disadvantage, it can also be positive as the researcher provides their experience into the research (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). To balance my subjectivity, I focused on the experiences of the participants because my goal in the study was to learn the preferences of financial aid administrators, and this could be different from my lived experiences.

Objectivity requires the researcher to make decisions based on the facts and not on opinion or personal interest. I accomplished objectivity by asking questions regarding leadership learning experiences that are not swayed in any direction for or against a leadership learning preference. My relationship to the participants was as a colleague within the same financial aid organization within the state of Oklahoma; however, I did not nor currently work in the same institution as the participants.

Summary

Chapter 3 described the methodology used in the study for investigating the learning preference for leaders learning to lead within higher education, specifically within financial aid offices in the state of Oklahoma, and the role of learning activities such as mentoring. I

interviewed participants and analyzed their responses from a phenomenological perspective. In the first three chapters, I introduced the study, provided the context with relevant literature, and described the methodology for the study. The results of the study are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Findings

The chapter reviews the purpose of the study, the problem statement, how the participants were selected, the methodology, and the study's findings. I describe in detail the rigorous process for analyzing the transcripts from the five interviews and the method to uncover themes from the three coding passes: process coding, a priori coding, and emotion coding. This chapter explains the rationale for the coding passes, the results from each pass, the categories revealed through the passes, and the themes that resulted from combining the categories and answering the study's research questions.

Research Questions

Q1. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe their preparation to lead?

Q1a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe the complexities of the various financial aid programs?

Q1b. In what ways does self-determination theory relate to learning leadership skills and the complexities of the financial aid programs?

Q2. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the skills needed for leadership in financial aid?

Q2a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe effective and ineffective leadership within the financial aid office?

Q3. In what ways do professional organizations contribute to the leadership training and development for financial aid leaders within the state of Oklahoma?

Q4. In what ways do the training and development needs of financial aid leaders differ from those of other areas in student affairs?

Q5. In what ways do formal and informal leadership training and development programs, such as mentoring, play a role in the leadership training and development of financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma?

Coding Methods

I completed the three coding passes and applied the preliminary codes to the data. I selected the three coding passes because they most appropriately answered the research questions and provided the best understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and their learning leadership methods. The findings from the three coding passes showed combined themes from each of the passes that answered the research questions.

Data analysis included a deductive and inductive process. The deductive approach required selecting codes before the interview. I selected a priori coding or codes established before the interviews to help determine the themes and the extent to which participants consulted professional organizations, mentor/mentoring, and formal and informal leadership training and learning. I also used an inductive process to determine themes. Emotion coding and process coding revealed themes in the interviews.

Findings

The three coding passes resulted in six themes and the overall process is demonstrated in Figure 1. The primary research question regarding how financial aid leaders learn leadership skills to lead the financial aid and the role of formal and informal leadership were addressed.

Figure 1*Coding Process***Process Coding**

The first coding pass was process coding and involved reading the transcripts line by line to determine the actions financial aid administrators take to learn job-related skills and leadership skills. Process coding focuses on action and verbs (gerunds) ending in “ing.” The process coding revealed the actions and ways in which financial aid administrators participate in the learning of leadership and financial aid rules and regulations. During this pass I highlighted words and phrases throughout the transcripts within Dedoose and exported them into Excel for further analysis. Process coding determined that *focusing on students, mentoring, learning and researching, following rules and regulations, and self-evaluating* were the most frequent actions of financial aid leaders in learning leadership.

Process coding was important for understanding the direct actions taken by participants in learning financial aid processes. All participants learned the leadership skills necessary from the ground up, meaning they began in the financial aid office as a follower or in an entry-level position and learned through experience the department’s necessary leadership skills. All

participants stated they researched an aspect of their job before deciding on a process, which consisted of reaching out to others within the financial aid organization or networking to find the answers. I describe each category in detail in the following sections.

Category: Focusing on Students

All participants stated their focus was on the student and learning the intricacies of financial aid to assist students and their financial needs better. The division of Student Financial Aid exists for the sole purpose of assisting students in obtaining funding for higher education. Every financial aid program within the division of financial aid is designed to provide financial assistance for the student. One participant stated they reached out to learn how other leaders in financial aid process specific types of students. Additionally, a participant stated that ineffective leadership would mean that “the students did not feel served and did not feel valued.” Another participant stated that financial aid leaders who are not knowledgeable create issues and barriers for the students. Additionally, one participant stated, “You gotta remember what the end goal is in terms of helping the student.” These statements suggest that these financial aid administrators strived to focus on students and that leadership development must be aimed at that goal.

Category: Mentoring

All participants stated they have either been mentored or have mentored others at some point in their career, either in a formal or informal capacity. Reasons for seeking a mentor varied from needing one-on-one development to needing advice from someone who could provide honest feedback. When asked about the mentoring process, participants stated the following: “It was really nice to have that one-on-one,” “I’ve kind of reached out to them as a mentor,” “I reached out to someone that I felt that their office and their team and their staff have a lot of respect, for someone I could trust, someone that I thought was going to give me some honest

feedback,” “I have had lots of people I have worked with over the years who I certainly look up to and emulate.”

Category: Networking

All participants stated that they have reached out to a colleague at least once during their tenure in financial aid with most participants stating they reached out to colleagues often with questions relating to financial aid processing, rules and regulations, or leadership. One participant stated that the most beneficial leadership training derived from networking:

I met a lot of great contacts through OASFAA . . . just attending the sessions and then you get to talking with people on things and you exchange phone numbers and then you kind of get to feel like I can pick up the phone and call almost anybody within the organization and get some kind of guidance or mentorship or opinions

Another participant stated:

Most beneficial, I would say actually going through the whole banner process and banner transitioning, because it allowed me to get familiar with those fellow [colleagues] networking, financial aid counselors, financial aid directors, and to learn the system that we were transitioning into from the top to bottom; I knew pieces of it, but not what I really needed to. And so, by doing that, it really kind of pushed me to take the extra leap and get into things that I had not gotten into before.

Category: Learning and Researching

Learning and researching comprises a large portion of a financial aid administrator’s job functions because rules and regulation change often. All participants stated they had a need to research some aspect of their job before deciding on a process. Researching and studying rules and regulations is one way to learn leadership: all five participants stated they actively

researched and read up on rules and regulations. A participant stated directly that they “research and learn on all available resources.” One participant stated, “I became a leader by experience, by observing great leaders,” emphasizing that leadership can be mimicked and duplicated. Another participant said, “I think I just watched and learned.”

Category: Following Rules and Regulations

All five financial aid administrators stated that financial aid is heavily regulated and being knowledgeable on these rules and regulations is an important aspect of the office compared to other areas of the Student Affairs division. When asked how the needs of financial aid differed from others in their division, participants stated the following: “I think there are so many rules and regulations that financial aid in general is a challenge,” “[financial aid leaders] need to be knowledgeable on the rules and the regulations and how that plays out in the financial aid office,” “processes are done correctly, within the regulations,” “we also follow so many rules and regulations,” “we gotta be able to turn on a dime, to be able to deal with this new,” “we are guided by much more rigid regulations.”

Category: Self-Evaluating

An important aspect of any profession is the process of knowing one’s own strengths and weaknesses and self-evaluating to determine areas of improvement needed for self-development. Financial aid administrators self-evaluate to determine the areas where improvement is needed in their professional development and growth. One participant stated, “Just kind of readdress areas. If it’s supervisory, well, probably need to check yourself on that too.” One participant stated it is important “to learn from mistakes and own up to those mistakes.” Self-initiative is also an important aspect that goes along with self-evaluating: “You’ve got to seek out opportunities.”

Preselected Codes

A priori codes, or preselected codes, are codes that are determined before the interviews take place. To determine the functions and reliance on the financial aid organizations, the use of formal and informal leadership development, and the impact of effective and ineffective leadership, I determined these codes at the beginning of the study.

The second coding pass involved a priori coding and searching for predetermined words and themes that I selected prior to conducting the interviews. The purpose of this coding pass was to listen for words or phrases where interviewees discussed or mentioned their involvement in the organizations of OASF AA, SWASF AA, NASF AA, networking and mentoring, formal and informal leadership development, and ineffective and effective leadership. This coding pass was conducted in Dedoose and exported into Excel for further analysis. Searching for the predetermined words and phrases was important, but once I exported the transcripts, it was also important to search for related codes, such as organization and times mentioned regarding ineffective leadership or effective leadership in questions and codes not directly related to the question being asked. For instance, in asking how leadership was learned and about job skills, one participant stated they were left to figure it out on their own, meaning their direct leader did not train them, which indicated ineffective leadership traits.

Category: Organizations

All participants were selected because they were members of OASF AA. The interviews also revealed that all participants were members of NASF AA, but only two of the five participants stated their institution was a member of the regional association of SWASF AA.

All participants stated they relied on the professional organizations for their own growth and development. One participant stated they did not consult the organizations for leadership

development: “Very rarely, to be honest, on leadership,” but did say they networked within the organization on policy and procedural questions, “I feel like I can pick up the phone and call almost anyone within the organization.”

Category: Mentoring and Networking

All five participants stated they relied on a mentor or networking for their own leadership learning. All five participants stated they have networked either on their own or through the professional organizations:

I will call other schools to talk to the directors to find out how to handle an issue, or if I think I know the answer, but I’m not a hundred percent sure. If I can’t find it right off hand by going to NASFAA or one of the sites, I’ll call a fellow director and talk to them.

Another participant said the following:

I met a lot of great contacts through OASFAA, but just attending the sessions and then you get to talking with people on things and you exchange phone numbers and then you kind of get to feel like I can pick up the phone and call almost anybody within the organization and get some kind of guidance or mentorship or opinions, right wrong or indifferent. I think I could still maybe pick up the phone and get that mentorship if need be.

When asked if they have consulted a mentor the participants stated that they have reached out to others within the professional organizations or another financial aid director or person they felt they could ask questions or opinions on financial aid topics or leadership advice.

Category: Formal and Informal Leadership

All five participants stated they have been involved in formal and informal leadership development and when asked what form they found most beneficial, most stated that they benefitted from informal leadership development and informal mentoring and networking.

One participant stated they preferred formal leadership development over informal and the structured environment of the formal training: “I think the formal was more beneficial.” However, one participant stated they preferred informal: “Probably the informal, I find more beneficial, but like I was saying, the formal, you can take away some things from that, too. But the informal to me is probably much more beneficial.” One participant stated, “I find the informal more beneficial; it’s good to have the formal and take away some ideas, but it’s the informal process I think that’s effective.”

Category: Ineffective and Effective Leadership in the Financial Aid Office

When asked how they described effective leadership, participants stated the following: “Hands on, learning right beside [your staff],” “your staff feel valued and want to contribute to your mission,” “make sure your staff are not just learning what they need to learn, but see you being hands on.” One participant elaborated on this:

Effective would be if the customers are satisfied, the processes are done correctly, within the regulations, you don’t want findings on the audit. Your staff is satisfied and feel valued and wants to contribute to our mission. So, I think that would be effective.

When participants were asked how they described ineffective leadership, they described it this way: “When the people above you don’t really know what your tasks entail, but they try to give you guidance.” Participants stated they were not trained by supervisors when they were learning their job functions: “All I could do was research.”

All five participants stated they have felt ineffective in their own leadership at some point in their career with most saying they felt ineffective almost daily. When I asked participants how they addressed the ineffective leadership in themselves, they stated: “refer back to the regs,” “dig down and figure it out, learn, pull as much information and allow the resources to figure out where we needed to grow, form, and land,” and “I began to read more books on effective leadership.” One participant described their process:

I have to take those necessary steps. Like if I’m feeling ineffective because my mistakes have been identified or someone else’s that rolls up to me, that I get I’m a list maker. I gotta sit down and make my list about what were the problems and how are we going to resolve them so that we don’t have them again. It’s a task-oriented thing for me in terms of that “to do” list. So that’s how I deal with it. I got to set those things out in terms of, if it’s milestones, we need to beat for a project or what. Especially when it comes to any mistakes it’s gotten that resolution has to be identified and that net, and then, whatever that appropriate follow-up is some of the next time, so it doesn’t happen and all those things.

Emotion Coding

Emotion coding involved listening to the participants and hearing of their experiences with leadership development. Not all participants were asked directly how they felt about leadership or issues faced within the financial aid office, but I conducted this coding by listening to the emotions and inflections in the participants’ voices. Since emotion coding focuses on the emotion of participants, this final coding pass was used to determine the emotion of the financial aid administrators in learning to lead in the financial aid office and involved listening to the participants and interpreting the emotion attached to the lived experience they were facing.

Emotion coding was important for better understanding the overall attachment of the participants. Financial aid can be a complicated and sometimes an unrewarding and thankless profession, so it was important to understand how the participants viewed this experience and how they attached emotion to leadership development. Emotion coding revealed conflicting emotions of frustration and satisfaction of being a leader in the financial aid office.

This coding pass was conducted in Dedoose and involved deciphering what the participants were saying but it also involved listening to the recorded transcripts and the words and inflections of the participants to get a better understanding of the emotions attached to learning financial aid and the pros and cons of training and/or the lack thereof. All five participants relayed emotions when describing their experience in the financial aid office. For instance, when participants spoke of the frustrations related to supervisors not understanding their jobs and with trying to assist students, one participant reflected on a specific instance of being torn away from the job to a meeting that seemed pointless when the students would be impacted, “three days before disbursement was getting ready to happen . . . disbursing the money, that’s a pretty important thing.”

One participant emphasized a supervisor left them in dark and they had to figure out a process on their own: “[the director] left us in the dark and then we had to find the light. That can be frustrating when you are kind of left to your own devices.” The transcribed interview revealed the frustration, but the recorded interview provided the inflection that can be heard and the frustration. Likewise, the joy of assisting students and putting the students first can also be heard in the recorded interview. Participant responses were the following: “keeping a focus on your students,” “making sure the students know what to do,” and “you have to service the students.”

Category: Passion

All five participants stated that assisting students in the financial aid process is a large part of their jobs and their passion for assisting students was heard in the words of the participants and the inflection of their voices. They made comments about the importance of completing all financial aid processes in time so students could receive their aid, and “all while keeping a focus on your students.” Others said the following: “Making sure the students understand what they need to do and even when situations are not all happy or good news, relay empathy and understanding and compassion with every transaction with students,” “you have the customer service piece of it, because you have to service the students,” “the students did not feel served and did not feel valued,” and “we’re meeting needs also, but we have to find this balance between meeting the needs and assisting the student, but also maintaining compliance with all the different things we have to do.”

Category: Frustration

The emotion of frustration was prevalent with all five participants. All five participants listed a component of their job functions they consider frustrating, ranging from the workload to not being understood by their supervisor. One participant stated the frustration this way: “everything is manual,” meaning much of the work is completed by hand without the use of electronic processes. All participants stated the frustration they feel over being governed by more than one entity (federal, state, and institutional) as well as the accrediting body. When discussing financial aid conferences, one participant stated it can be frustrating when no new information is presented.

Participants stated frustration at feeling as if the financial aid office did not fall neatly within the division of Student Affairs. One participant stated that

I think financial aid is a little bit of an odd duck. I think we could plug in under any umbrella to be honest, because academic-wise it gets into financial aid, because they have to meet certain academic standards for financial aid enrollment. I think we could also plug in under finance because of the nature of the financial aid. And then we could also plug in under student affairs because it's about the student experience somewhat. I'm not sure where we would plug in best. I'm not sure on where a financial aid office should be plugged in, under which umbrella.

Financial aid leaders also stated frustration at not feeling they had the support of their direct supervisors: "I didn't feel like I had the support I needed."

Category: Fearful

Fear of failure was prevalent in the words of the participants. They were fearful of supervisors or others thinking they did not know what they were doing. One participant stated they feared it would be discovered they were an imposter who was faking at knowing what they were doing all along: "I battled a lot with the idea that imposter syndrome . . . They're going to find out that I've been bluffing all this time;" "There are times when I feel like everything's going wrong, and it's like, why am I in this spot because I don't know what I am doing;" and "Multiple times! I think that is where growth comes from too."

Financial aid leaders are also fearful of auditors finding compliance issues. Participants stated, "You don't want findings on the audit," "What are they going to find? Where have I failed?"; "We try our hardest, but basically the school absolutely does not want to be fined by the Department of Ed, regardless." This fear stemmed from audit findings sometimes leading to monetary fines for the institution, but most often audit findings make the financial aid leaders feel incompetent or viewed as incompetent to their supervisors. This fear drives financial aid

leaders to delve deeply into rules and regulations and network with colleagues before making decisions in some instances. One participant described their fears in this way:

All of this CARES stuff, that's going on recently with the COVID outbreak. The Department of Education was very gray about [it]; they put their own guidelines that there was just so much gray area with the CARES funds that the needs for financial aid administrators had to be human networking, because if you don't have those people to call and say, "Hey, is this what you heard?" And then this money has to be disbursed within a year and making sure you're doing everything right. So, these internal audits and that your understanding is right. I think the need for building and maintaining healthy and strong relationships is huge because you're dealing with money and that at time sensitive issue. So I think trust and building healthy relationships.

Combined Codes and Categories of Codes

After coding the interviews and placing the codes within categories, the final step was to determine if the codes could be combined to reveal the overall themes that answer the guiding research questions. I analyzed the words, phrases, emotions, and patterns identified in the three coding passes and grouped them into categories. Categorizing the three codes was an important and necessary step because it allowed a review of the overall codes and areas where codes could be combined before determining the overall themes from the data. For instance, the codes of reading and studying could be combined with researching and financial aid organizations for a combined category to describe how financial aid administrators learn financial aid rules, regulations, and leadership skills.

I determined a priori codes prior to the interviews. These consisted of formal and informal leadership, mentoring, ineffective and effective leadership, and the financial aid

organizations of OASFAA, SWASFAA, and NASFAA. These codes were prevalent through each coding pass as financial aid leaders discussed their leadership within the financial aid office.

Mentoring existed as a process code as well as a priori code, and networking was a code found within the process coding. Mentoring and networking were combined, because reaching out to colleagues and seeking advice can be classified in both ways and as both formal or informal. Networking and mentoring were cross-coded in process coding as well as a priori coding. These codes could be combined to understand the action of participants in learning financial aid as well as the process of learning leadership skills.

Emotion coding revealed the passion of financial aid administrators in performing their job functions, including assisting students. Process coding revealed the action of assisting students in achieving their educational goals through financial assistance. These two codes were combined for the overall coding of assisting students, since the overall goal of financial aid leaders is to assist students and ensure their staff are prepared professionally and mentally in these areas. After reviewing the codes and categories of codes, the codes and categories were combined to reveal six themes.

Emerged Themes

After I coded the transcripts analyzed them for categories, the final step was to determine themes. Codes from the three coding passes resulted in themes that answer the guiding research questions. The themes were selected based on the answers to the research questions. They were determined through the transcribed interviews and the research participants' words and their experiences with leadership and learning to lead in the financial aid office. Even though the leadership experiences of the participants were unique to them and sometimes unique to their

institutions, financial aid rules and regulations do not differ by institution but can be experienced by each financial aid leader as a lived experience.

Some codes and subcategories were combined to reveal the overall themes. Six themes emerged from the data and the direct words from participants and the emotions they attached to their experiences. Overall, the three coding passes were combined to determine the six themes that answer the research questions and the way in which financial aid leaders learn leadership skills.

In vivo coding—using the words of the participants—was an important aspect of determining the themes from the transcripts. All three coding passes utilized the direct words of the participants in determining the overall themes of the interviews from the five participants. I found six themes in the transcripts:

1. Financial aid leaders rely on the professional organizations of OASFAA, SWASFAA, and NASFAA for professional development and financial aid information.
2. Financial aid leaders seek formal and informal leadership training opportunities.
3. Financial aid leaders consistently self-evaluate their knowledge to determine the additional training and leadership that is needed for the financial aid office, especially since the financial aid leader is responsible for the relaying the information to their followers.
4. Mentoring and networking are functions of a financial aid administrator's job duties, but they also rely on mentoring and networking for their own leadership development.
5. Effective leadership is vital in the financial aid office.
6. Financial aid is highly regulated and financial aid leaders feel torn between their

institutions and the regulations they must follow.

Discussion of the Thematic Process

As previously stated, thematic analysis seeks to recognize patterns in the data. I reviewed the three coding passes—process, a priori, and emotion—to determine repetition within the data. Even though phenomenology explores individual experiences, patterns or themes resulted from the way the individuals described their own experiences. Process coding described the actions of the participants in learning to lead the financial aid office, a priori coding was determined before the interviews and involved specific words and phrases, and emotion coding involved listening to the participants and hearing of their experiences with leadership development. I combined all three codes from each of the 19 questions to create the six themes that describe the lived experiences of the five participants. Table 1 demonstrates the coding passes, the categories and subcategories created, and the overall themes that emerged.

Table 1*Thematic Process*

Coding passes	Categories/Subcategories through coding passes	Themes
First coding pass- Process coding	1. Learning/researching/mentoring 2. Focusing on students 3. Following rules and regulations	1. Professional organizations
Second coding pass- A priori coding	4. Formal training 5. Self-evaluating 6. Guiding/training employees (subcategory)	2. Formal and informal leadership training opportunities.
Third Coding pass- Emotion coding	7. Communicating (subcategory) 8. Informal training 9. Mentoring 10. Networking 11. Ineffective leadership 12. Effective leadership 13. Organizations - NASFAA, SWASFAA, OASFAA 14. Emotion - frustration/stretched thin/not enough resources or technology 15. Emotion - fearful of auditors/fines/being fired 16. Emotion - financial aid is complicated/challenging (subcategory) 17. Emotion - passion	3. Self-evaluate/self-awareness 4. Mentoring and networking. 5. Effective leadership 6. Rules and regulations

Theme 1: Professional Organizations

Theme 1 was that financial aid leaders rely on the professional organizations of OASFAA, SWASFAA, and NASFAA for personal and professional development and financial aid information. I analyzed the responses of the five participants to the 19 questions to determine the reliance of financial aid administrators on professional organizations. This theme was most prevalent within the process coding and a priori coding passes. All participants utilized and valued the OASFAA, SWASFAA, and NASFAA for the information the associations made available and provided to members. Responses included the following: “They provide a lot of different training opportunities, it’s not just conferences,” “I met a lot of great people through the

state organization,” “if I’m struggling, I know who to call,” “helping us keep up with the regulations, helping us know which ways to approach certain situations with students. It’s just the really good and beneficial training tools,” “they helped me grow as a leader by knowing and setting the standards for our daily operations for what’s expected of our department,” and “they helped me grow as a leader by knowing and setting the standards for our daily operations for what’s expected of our department.”

Theme 2: Formal and Informal Leadership Training Opportunities

Theme 2 was revealed during the three coding passes and direct responses to the questions posed as well as within the elaboration of the responses to each of the 19 interview questions. All three coding passes revealed this theme. Participants talked about the times they sought formal learning opportunities: “It’s good to have formal training and take away ideas,” and “the formal leadership training, having those scheduled conferences that you go to with agendas in place and having those people, those human resources right there to interact through those experiences.” All participants stated they had at times participated in the formal conferences presented by OASF AA, SWASF AA, and NASF AA and often listened to ED webinars.

Theme 3: Self-Evaluation/Self-Awareness

Theme 3 revealed that financial aid leaders consistently evaluate their knowledge to determine the additional training and leadership needed for the financial aid office, especially since the financial aid leader is responsible for relaying the information to their followers. All three coding passes revealed the reliance on self-knowledge for leading the financial aid office as leaders described their actions toward leadership development and the emotion of feeling ineffective at times. A process for learning leadership skills is seeking continual self-knowledge

and opportunities for growth and development, especially in an industry that is constantly evolving, and in which the rules change rapidly. One participant stated the following:

For me, it was about the lack of training in areas, or I need more knowledge in areas such as professional judgement, or if it would be verification, or whatever. I would refer back to the regs and try to go through some training on my own, just a refresher course, such as maybe some of the webinars or training sessions I have from the IFAP website, or maybe just reading the handbook, just kind of re-address. If it's supervisory, well probably need to check yourself on that too, and maybe even get some guidance from a peer.

Others commented as follows: "We do self-audits on things," "I think reading, educating yourself and continuously having a desire to want to grow yourself," and "I realized quickly that my communication style was not effective for that person."

Theme 4: Mentoring and Networking

Theme 4 was that mentoring and networking are functions of a financial aid administrator's job duties, but the participants also relied on mentoring and networking for their own leadership development. Participants stated that mentoring and networking are important for a financial aid administrator to learn financial aid rules and regulatory information, but financial aid administrators also rely on mentoring and networking for their own leadership development and growth. One participant stated that

the Department of Education was very gray about [it], they put their own guidelines that there was just so much gray area with the CARES funds that the needs for financial aid administrators had to be human networking, because if you don't have those people to call and say, "Hey, is this what you heard? Is this what you heard?"

Another participant stated that mentoring was an aspect of their development into a leader within the department: “After several years of mentoring from the counselors and other financial aid leaders, I worked my way up to that position.”

Theme 5: Effective Leadership

This theme was revealed during the three coding passes as financial aid leaders described the complexities of the financial aid programs and the difficulties associated with rules and regulations that change regularly. A priori coding focused on effective leadership specifically, while process coding focused on the actions taken by financial aid leaders to ensure they were effective, and emotion coding uncovered the emotions of participants, both positive and negative, about effective and ineffective leadership in the financial aid office.

Participants stated that effective leadership includes leading by example, being responsible, being knowledgeable, guiding and communicating with employees, being self-aware, and focusing on students. Financial aid leaders did not hesitate to answer questions about effective leadership and what an effective leader entails: “Effective would be leading by example,” “being hands on and learning right beside them,” “trained for hours one-on-one,” “Your staff is satisfied and feel valued,” “responsibility can build credibility,” and “if you’re not willing to get in there and work with your people and see what problems they have and what they need and be willing to help, you’re not going to be an effective leader.” Additionally, one participant stated the following:

I would describe effective leadership as your ability to get the job done in a timely way, in a way that gets the job done but maintains morale and growth of everybody in the department. At the same time, I would say that’s effective when you’re getting the job done and getting it done according to guidelines and by deadlines and at the same time,

growing and developing the people in the department and the department itself; that would be effective.”

Ineffective leadership was described by one participant as the following:

A low trust environment, I would say, is very ineffective. When you've got an environment that's low trust, a culture that's low trust, [it] is ineffective. I believe, in turn, that affects those deadlines and the ability to get jobs done in time, whether that's people taking off work and a job can't be done because the environment is low trust and it's not a culture that's conducive to meeting and exceeding the standards set forth by the financial aid department.

Theme 6: Rules and Regulations

Financial aid is highly regulated and financial aid leaders feel torn between their institutions and the regulations they must follow. This finding was revealed in all three coding passes as financial aid leaders sought development and reached out to financial aid organizations, but was most prevalent within the emotion coding process as participants described their struggles and joys working in the financial aid office. Emotions are present in all human experiences and leadership can often take an emotional toll on individuals. Participants mentioned times they felt conflicted between the institution that they were hired to serve and the federal regulations they must follow. This theme was prevalent throughout the interviews and was revealed through all three coding passes. Process coding described the way in which the participants sought guidance when supervisors did not understand the regulations that financial aid leaders are required to follow and the timeliness of processing within the financial aid office. A priori coding searched for times when participants mentioned regulations and guidelines.

Emotion coding focused on the conflict mentioned by the participants and the frustration of not being supported by supervisors. One participant stated the following:

All the leaders had to read this book and discuss it together. Yep, so I didn't find that helpful. I just didn't. I just felt the book was taken out of context. What's the word I'm looking for, applicable, it was, may have been applicable to do customer service and I get that, where we need to be very conscious and very customer friendly because a student's experience is part of it. But then we also follow so many rules and regulations that I didn't feel like some of it could easily apply, maybe. And maybe at the time I was just so overwhelmed with our normal daily tasks that we do in a financial aid office . . . once I got home after maybe 10, 12, 15 hours knowing that I had to pick up this dang book and read it. And so maybe part of that may have been me. I was so exhausted by the time I actually read it. Maybe it just didn't sink in or maybe the timing of it was all wrong.

Additionally, one participant stated that "daily, which can lead to frustration and a feeling of not being supported, since the supervisors of financial aid do not understand the complexities and functions of financial aid," "the thing with financial aid, you can't always make everybody happy, students included. We try our hardest, but basically the school absolutely does not want to be fined by the Department of Ed, regardless."

How Do Financial Aid Administrators Utilize Self-Determination Theory?

Several positive aspects of self-determination theory continue to be beneficial within the work environment and, as predicted, financial aid administrators, who were not placed in a formal leadership training program, relied on informal leadership training opportunities to learn job-related functions. The field of financial aid can at times be unrewarding, complicated, and

the regulations change regularly causing confusion and the need to reach out to individuals in the financial aid field for assistance.

Self-determination theory states that, often, the only reward within a task is intrinsically related. Within financial aid, it is the satisfaction of assisting a student in their higher education pursuits, performing job duties, and passing audits with no findings and often not being recognized by administration for doing so. Individuals who complete tasks for outward rewards compared to individuals who perform tasks for inward gratification do not perform as well (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Positive aspects of self-determination theory include competence, autonomy, employee satisfaction, and less desire for employees to leave the organization (Decker & Van Quaquebeke, 2015; Guillaume & Kalkbrenner, 2019), which are all important within the financial aid office for individual development and to reduce workforce turnover. In the interviews, financial aid administrators discussed their job functions and their desire to assist students in completing their education and it was clear that assisting students and the inward reward and gratification was a factor in continuing to work in the financial aid office.

It was predicted that financial aid administrators who were not placed in a formal leadership training program would rely on informal leadership training opportunities to learn job-related functions. The field of financial aid can at times be unrewarding and complicated and the only reward is often feeling good about assisting a student in their higher education pursuits and performing job duties even when not being recognized for doing so.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the coding process including my rationale for selecting the coding passes from the interviews that were used to determine the codes, the categories from the coding passes, and the excerpts that described those categories. In addition,

themes emerged from the data analysis as well as excerpts that described the overall themes from the interviews. The data were collected and then analyzed for the thematic analysis. This chapter also described how financial aid leaders utilized self-determination theory for development. I discuss and interpret the results in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter reviews the research questions, discusses the findings in relation to past literature, and provides recommendations for future research. The results of this qualitative phenomenology study indicate that financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma have multifaceted experiences learning the complexities of financial aid and leadership. This chapter provides the answers to the guiding research questions and how the themes answer the research questions. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences for leaders learning to lead within higher education, specifically within financial aid offices in the state of Oklahoma, and the role of workplace learning both formally and informally, on leadership preparation.

The following research questions guided the study:

Q1. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe their preparation to lead?

Q1a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the complexities of the various financial aid programs?

Q1b. In what ways does self-determination theory relate to learning leadership skills and the complexities of the financial aid programs?

Q2. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the skills needed for leadership in financial aid?

Q2a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe effective and ineffective leadership within the financial aid office?

Q3. In what ways do professional organizations contribute to the leadership training and development for financial aid leaders within the state of Oklahoma?

Q4. In what ways do the training and development needs of financial aid leaders differ from those of other areas in student affairs?

Q5. In what ways do formal and informal leadership training and development programs, such as mentoring, play a role in the leadership training and development of financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma?

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature

As previously mentioned, the following study examined leadership training in higher education and the importance of training leaders in the proper management and leadership skills needed to lead higher education entities (Nica, 2013). The study explored the lived experiences of financial aid leaders learning to lead since training continues to be an essential element for institutional success, and having leaders who are prepared to lead institutions is crucial (Riley & Russell, 2013).

Theme 1: Financial Aid Leaders Rely on Professional Organizations

Theme 1 answers the following research questions:

Q3. In what ways do professional organizations contribute to the leadership training and development for financial aid leaders within the state of Oklahoma?

Q5. In what ways do formal and informal leadership training and development programs, such as mentoring, play a role in the leadership training and development of financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma?

The research findings showed that all five participants rely on professional organizations for leadership growth and development, and for guidance on the financial aid rules and regulations. This finding is consistent with the previous research findings that relate to professional organizations and members' preparation within the organizations. Individuals

entering a career are expected to meet a set of criteria known as competencies (Woolf & Martinez, 2013). Based on feedback from the interviews, the professional organizations prepare financial aid administrators for the competencies of the profession. Participants stated they must be knowledgeable of the financial aid rules and regulations and the professional organizations offer the support and training necessary to meet the competencies of leadership within the financial aid office. The top five most important skills include the ability to provide a high level of customer service, the ability to follow the rules and policies, the ability to work effectively as a team, the ability to self-direct, and interpersonal skills. Of these, the skill most frequently utilized in the financial aid office is the ability to follow the rules and policies (Woolf & Martinez, 2013).

Even though financial aid is not specifically mentioned, Schuh et al. (2017) explained the necessary competencies for individuals entering the student affairs profession, the division in which financial aid is located. Competency areas were created because of the combined efforts of two organizations: College Student Educators International (ACPA) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA). The competency areas listed include values, assessment, policy, governance, leadership, law, technology, personal and ethical foundations, philosophy and history, evaluation and research, organizational and human resources, social justice and inclusion, student learning and development, and advising and supporting (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; Schuh et al., 2017).

Student affairs professionals must have a variety of skills to be successful in their roles, including the ability to collaborate with other offices on campus (O'Holloran, 2019), counseling skills (Stark & Weinbaum, 2018), customer service, and interpersonal skills (Woolf & Martinez, 2013), to name a few. Additionally, professional development begins immediately upon

entering their first roles within the Student Affairs division (Dinise-Halter, 2017). Individuals employed in the financial aid office require additional skills and knowledge from other departments within student affairs to help students succeed in higher education.

Participants were asked directly in the interview what skills they thought were necessary for financial aid administrators; their answers agree with the literature, but participants also added that empathy, flexibility, training, dedication, helping students, and communication were necessary for leading the financial aid office. The participant responses demonstrate what the literature stated; individuals need many skills to work in the Student Affairs division. This study did not focus solely on the skills required for financial aid leaders. However, the posed research questions asked about the needed skills for financial aid leaders, and the answers are similar to those found by Woolf and Martinez (2013).

Theme 2: Financial Aid Leaders Seek Formal and Informal Leadership Training

Opportunities

Theme 2 answers the following research questions:

Q2. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the skills needed for leadership in financial aid?

Q5. In what ways do formal and informal leadership training and development programs, such as mentoring, play a role in the leadership training and development of financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma?

Seidle et al. (2016) stated it is important to understand if the investment in formal leadership training programs is worth the monetary investment. Conferences and memberships to professional organizations can be expensive. However, all five participants stated they found the conferences beneficial for professional development. The research revealed that all five

participants have sought formal and informal training opportunities. Participants described their experiences with formal and informal leadership training opportunities, the process for selecting the most beneficial options, and the emotion related to the expense and experience. The participants provided details regarding their experience with both formal and informal leadership opportunities and the benefits of both forms. Conferences and webinars were the most utilized form of formal leadership development—all five participants stated they have attended conferences during their tenure as leaders. Mentoring and networking were the most utilized form of informal leadership development with all five participants stating they routinely seek opportunities to consult peers with questions and guidance.

Financial aid offices have limited funding and resources available for training and development, and the available funds must be sensibly expended. Informal development, such as networking or reaching out to someone the participants consider to be a mentor, is often free and could explain why this is also an appealing option for financial aid leaders as well as being convenient and timely.

My goal was to determine what training opportunities were utilized more—formal or informal—by financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma. Gallant (2014) stated that leaders preferred formalized leadership development programs. However, this study found that most of the participants prefer informal leadership development over formalized development because of the flexibility, availability, and cost of the opportunities. This finding could be beneficial when determining the best use of institutional and departmental funds for professional development.

Financial aid directors must also have leadership skills to lead the financial aid office and since there is no formal financial aid training before being hired as a financial aid director, the training must occur on the job. Researchers agree that several positive aspects of self-

determination theory continue to be beneficial within the work environment. Positive aspects of self-determination theory include competence, autonomy, employee satisfaction, and less desire for employees to leave the organization (Decker & Van Quaquebeke, 2015; Guillaume & Kalkbrenner, 2019), which are all important within the financial aid office for individual development as well as to reduce workforce turnover.

Theme 3: Financial Aid Leaders Consistently Self-Evaluate Their Knowledge

Theme 3 describes the answer to the following subquestions:

Q1a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the complexities of the various financial aid programs?

Q1b. In what ways does self-determination theory relate to learning leadership skills and the complexities of the financial aid programs?

The five participants revealed competencies and skills needed for financial aid leaders that support the previous findings. Previous studies, such as the one conducted by Dinise-Halter (2017), uncovered seven themes relating to challenges and needed support for new professionals working in student affairs. Likewise, Woolf and Martinez (2013) also compiled a list of skills from a survey of financial aid officers. The competencies closely resemble the areas listed for student affairs professionals. The top five most essential skills include the ability to provide a high level of customer service, the ability to follow the rules and policies, the ability to work effectively as a team, the ability to self-direct, and interpersonal skills. The skill most frequently utilized in the financial aid office is the ability to follow the rules and policies (Woolf & Martinez, 2013).

The study findings indicated financial aid leaders evaluate their own knowledge to determine where self-development is needed. All participants stated that leadership development

did not occur until they were in the financial aid leader role. In review, effective leaders are crucial within the financial aid office; however, institutions of higher education are not training leaders to lead effectively (Nica, 2013; Parrish, 2015). All participants learned the leadership of financial aid after they entered the field of financial aid with all five participants stating they began as followers in the financial aid office and learned the job functions of a leader from the ground-level. Therefore, it was important for the participants to analyze their self-knowledge to determine where they needed growth and development to assist students and their own staff.

As previously stated, students rely on the expertise of financial aid administrators to guide their financial decisions. It is crucial for financial aid leaders to understand the nuances of financial aid, to train staff on the numerous and varied eligibility criteria for federal, state, and institutional financial aid programs, and to comply with all rules and regulations, all while assisting students in achieving their educational goals (McGhee, 2015). Meeting these standards requires effective leadership skills in the financial aid office and requires self-awareness and self-development.

The participants described their experiences with learning financial aid and taking on the financial aid office's leadership roles. As noted, every job has a learning curve and a period of learning that accompanies the position. So it is important to invest in newly appointed student affairs professionals from the beginning of their career (Dinise-Halter, 2017). This is true with financial aid leaders who are learning the financial aid rules and regulations as well as the leadership skills to lead the division.

All five participants stated the ways in which they have learned financial aid rules and regulations. Workplace learning has become an increasing focus of interest (Muybayrik, 2018), and it is important to note a one-size-fits-all approach to workplace learning does not exist

(Manuti et al., 2015). Participants emphasized in the descriptions of their own training that the expectation that all financial aid leaders learn the necessary leadership skills in the same way and at the same pace has not been effective. Some participants were forced to learn on their own and thrived in that environment, while others benefitted by reaching out to colleagues. This is important when structuring a training plan or development plan. However, if a formal development plan did not exist, financial aid leaders sought development on their own.

Self-determination theory (SDT) emphasizes the reasons individuals perform tasks based on the motivators of intrinsic or extrinsic factors (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals who complete tasks for external rewards compared to individuals who perform tasks for inward gratification do not perform as well (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Financial aid administrators perform job functions to assist students in receiving the financial aid necessary to attend their institutions and they are intrinsically motivated and enjoy this aspect of their job.

Previous studies have determined the effectiveness of SDT in a leadership context; SDT describes how individuals perform in various settings (Beck & Davidson, 2019). Based on previous research studies and the implications of SDT on job-related functions, I predicted that financial aid administrators who were not placed in a formal leadership training program would rely on informal leadership training opportunities to learn job-related roles. All five participants stated times when they relied on their own motivation for learning the complexities of financial aid rules and regulations and since the field of financial aid can at times feel unrewarding and unnecessarily complicated, the only reward is often feeling good about assisting a student in their higher education pursuits and performing job duties.

Theme 4: Financial Aid Leaders Rely on Mentoring and Networking

Theme 4 answers the following research questions:

Q1a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe learning the complexities of the various financial aid programs?

Q5. In what ways do formal and informal leadership training and development programs, such as mentoring, play a role in the leadership training and development of financial aid administrators in the state of Oklahoma?

This theme is connected to previous research findings that informal mentoring has benefits, including increasing leadership development, as individuals create relationships with others (Bynum, 2015). Cherrstrom et al. (2018) found that peer mentoring helped adult learners build a network for sustained learning for the future. Results of the study found that financial aid leaders seek networking opportunities within the financial aid organizations as well as with peers they have met in the financial aid profession. Even though participants stated they did not formally participate in a mentoring program, the process they describe in reaching out to a trusted colleague is considered an informal mentoring relationship, especially when they are reaching out to someone with more experience and expertise in an area. This theme was revealed in all three coding passes as participants described their process for selecting a mentor and networking, and the emotion connected with selecting someone they could trust and seek professional guidance and direction. This theme was also uncovered during the a priori coding and subcategories of mentoring and networking.

All participants stated they did not have a formal mentoring relationship, but they had reached out to colleagues or others in financial aid for advice or guidance. Mentorship leads to a positive experience for learning and has been proven effective in various contexts, including newly tenured professors and student leaders learning to lead within an educational environment (Gray, 2018; Weijden et al., 2015). Mentoring programs or one-on-one mentoring can be useful

for leaders desiring feedback and guided direction toward leadership development within higher education. In the research by Dinise-Halter (2017), mentoring was beneficial in the development of new student affairs professionals. However, the participants interviewed did not have experience with the formal mentoring programs described in the literature and relied on informal mentoring and networking for their own development needs. This finding emphasizes that a trusting relationship is beneficial to leadership development and growth and supports the previous findings that adults often have issues with structured or guided learning development (Klinge, 2015).

Theme 5: Effective Leadership Is Vital in the Financial Aid Office

Theme 5 answers the following research questions:

Q2a. How do financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma describe effective and ineffective leadership within the financial aid office?

Q3. In what ways do professional organizations contribute to the leadership training and development for financial aid leaders within the state of Oklahoma?

The research study found that effective leadership is vital within the financial aid office for numerous reasons. The financial aid office is required to be administratively capable according to the rules and regulations set in place by the U.S. ED and to protect the institution from questionable audit findings and fines. All five participants stated they began at the entry level in the financial aid office, which lends support to previous findings that few institutions provide training to aspiring leaders. Instead, leaders are often taught leadership skills only after they have been promoted to a leadership position (Hempsall, 2014). Workplace learning describes the activities and processes which occur within the context of the work environment (Manuti et al., 2015; Zhao & Ko, 2018).

It is important to note that financial aid employees who perform their jobs well do not automatically develop into effective leaders, and as previously stated, higher education institutions have a widespread practice for promoting employees, who are regarded as experts in their field and have performed well within their division, to leadership roles (Morris & Laiple, 2015). All five participants began at the entry level of financial aid and worked their way up to the leader level. This history with the participants was not known prior to conducting the interviews but supports the notion that hard work can reap benefits in the form of a promotion, but requires the leader to seek growth in leadership opportunities.

Theme 6: Financial Aid Is Highly Regulated and Financial Aid Leaders Feel Torn Between Their Institutions and the Regulations

Theme 6 answers the following research questions:

Q3. In what ways do professional organizations contribute to the leadership training and development for financial aid leaders within the state of Oklahoma?

Q4. In what ways do the training and development needs of financial aid leaders differ from those of other areas in student affairs?

Theme 6 answered two research tied to professional organizations and the training and development needs of financial aid leaders. The study revealed that financial leaders often feel torn between the needs of the institutions and students they serve, all made more complicated because of the many regulations they must follow. The study also disclosed that it is the professional organizations that provide the guidance and training needed to understand the complicated rules and regulations. Participants stated other areas of student affairs may not be as highly regulated compared to the financial aid office. This is important because federal financial aid rules and regulations are in a state of constant change and the changes occur quickly (Fuller,

2014; Pingel & Weeden, 2017). All five participants stated that financial aid is complicated and the rules for compliance change regularly, creating frustration as they try to serve the students and the institution that employs them. Financial aid administrators must balance the needs of the institution with the demands of state and federal requirements that can seem burdensome and may, at times, seem to conflict. Leadership in higher education requires management and leadership skills (Nica, 2013; Stefani, 2015), and working in the financial aid office requires a specialized skillset. Financial aid leaders must be competent in multiple areas (McGhee, 2015; Phillips & Baron, 2013).

Moreover, federal rules and regulations are complicated and change regularly, and financial aid administrators must be prepared to make changes quickly. During times of natural disasters, such as hurricanes or pandemics, the rules are modified, and the financial aid administrator must quickly adapt to a new set of rules. For example, this dissertation was written during a pandemic that altered the way higher education operates, requiring changes to federal financial aid rules and regulations, including refunds, academic progress, and returning funds to the ED when students withdraw. The suddenly revised rules required financial aid leaders to communicate the new rules to their institutional leaders and students. In my research interviews, the financial aid leaders discussed their experiences with the pandemic and adhering to the new guidelines and feeling torn between the needs of the students and the needs of the institution.

Limitations

The limitations of the study included only interviewing financial aid leaders from the state of Oklahoma and only one financial aid administrator from each sector. The amount of time the participants were employed in financial aid was not considered, because the only requirement was that the participants were leaders in the financial aid office. Financial aid administrators who

have been employed for a longer period of time before becoming leaders in the department may have preferences that differ from new financial aid administrators, and leaders who are employed at institutions with a restricted or limited travel budget may not experience training and development outside the state of Oklahoma.

Recommendations

This study focused on financial aid leaders from the state of Oklahoma. A recommendation for future research would be to interview financial aid leaders from states outside of Oklahoma. Participants were not asked about years of service in the financial aid office or how many years of leadership service they had prior to entering the field of financial aid and becoming a leader in the financial aid office. A recommendation would be to categorize participants by years of experience in the financial aid office to determine if age, experience, or sector determines the leadership preparation methods that participants seek.

This study did not focus on mentoring programs; however, a future recommendation would be to study the impact of formal and informal mentoring programs and the impact on the growth and development of financial aid professionals as leaders and followers. The literature provides evidence of the benefits of these programs and it would be beneficial for leaders in the financial aid associations at the state, regional, and national levels to know the impact of financial aid mentoring programs for future development.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a description of the results of the study, its relationship to past literature, a discussion of themes, and a description of what they mean. I also discussed the study's limitations, and made recommendation for future studies. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of leaders learning to lead

within higher education, specifically within financial aid offices in the state of Oklahoma, and the role of workplace learning, both formally and informally, on leadership preparation. This qualitative study provided insight into the learning experiences of financial aid leaders in the state of Oklahoma and the experiences with formal and informal leadership development, mentoring and networking, and the implications of ineffective and effective leadership in the financial aid office.

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Appendix A: Solicitation Request

Hello,

My name is Diana Sanders and I am a doctoral student in the Organizational Leadership program at Abilene Christian University. I am reaching out to you to invite you to participate in a study on the leadership learning experiences of financial aid administrators. This study is important as it will provide information about the learning experiences of financial aid administrators and the lived experiences for leaders learning to lead within higher education.

Participation in this study requires that you participate in an interview. The interview will be conducted electronically and will last approximately forty-five minutes to one hour and will be scheduled to accommodate your schedule. If necessary, a follow up interview will be scheduled to clarify any information collected in the initial interview. The follow up interview will last no longer than thirty minutes and will also be conducted electronically.

Any identifying information will be removed from the final documents and analysis. If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond via email to xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx and respond, "Yes, I wish to be included in the study."

Thank you,

Diana Sanders

Doctoral Student

Appendix B: Participant Interview Questions

How did you become a leader within the financial aid office?

What challenges have you experienced leading the financial aid office?

What skills do you think are necessary for leading within the financial aid office?

How do you think leaders should learn the leadership skills necessary to lead the financial aid office?

How have you learned the necessary skills to lead within the financial aid office?

How do you describe effective and ineffective leadership within the financial aid office?

Have you ever experienced a time when you thought you were an ineffective leader?

What did you do to address the ineffective leadership that you experienced in your own leadership?

What professional organization is your financial aid office a member?

How do these financial aid organizations contribute to your learning financial aid material?

In what ways have these financial aid organizations contributed to your financial aid leadership?

How often do you consult these financial aid organizations when you have questions regarding leadership?

Based on your experience, what are the leadership needs of student affairs professionals?

In what ways do you think financial aid professional leadership needs differ from other student affairs offices within student affairs?

Describe your learning experiences with informal leadership training.

Describe your learning experience with formal leadership training.

Describe a time when you consulted a mentor for your leadership learning.

Describe how you selected a possible mentor.

What has been the most beneficial leadership training program or experience in your tenure in financial aid? What has been the least beneficial?

Appendix C: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

June 3, 2020



Diana Sanders
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies
Abilene Christian University

Dear Diana,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Learning Experiences of Financial Aid Administrators: A Phenomenological Study of Workplace Learning",

(IRB# 20-071) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs