TRADITION IN COLLEGE STUDENT AFFAIRS: HOW MENTAL MODELS INFLUENCE HIRING MANAGERS’ SCREENING OF APPLICANTS FOR ENTRY-LEVEL POSITIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ screening of applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States. Two research questions guided this investigation: First, what are hiring managers’ mental models for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States? Second, what is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States? The primary data for this study included semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seven student affairs hiring managers. Additional data for the study included field notes, observations, and documents collected during the interviews. Data collected was analyzed using a general inductive analysis, which included constant comparison, multiple coding strategies, and triangulation. Participants consisted of hiring managers employed at public and private, traditional not-for-profit colleges and universities. Participants’ range and variation included years of experience, job title, gender, ethnicity, location of institution, and enrollment at institution. Findings showed that participants identified five mental models when screening entry-level applicants: 1) traditional education backgrounds are most credible, 2) practical application of required knowledge, 3) personality aligns with job expectations, 4) ability to adapt to campus environment, and 5) career continuity. These mental models play a critical role in the five-phase screening process: Phase 1) construction of job description, Phase 2) activation of student affairs network, Phase 3) filtering applicants for preferred qualifications, Phase 4) assessment of candidates’ fit, and Phase 5) synthesis to recommend finalists. From these findings, three conclusions were drawn: 1) Bias
exists in the student affairs hiring process toward traditional schools, which may exclude candidates from proprietary schools in the screening process; 2) Subjective aspects of applicant screening reflect a mixture of dynamic contextual factors influenced by the attitudes and opinions of hiring managers and other campus stakeholders; and 3) The mental models of hiring managers in college student affairs at traditional schools include preference for applicants with traditional career paths.

*Keywords:* mental models, basic qualitative study, proprietary schools, virtual human resources, decision-making, screening theory, college student affairs, higher education
DEDICATION

“Without struggle, there is no progress” ---Frederick Douglass

To my parents, Larry and Jacquelyn Davis

To my sisters, Tamara and Mercedes

To my grandmothers Callie Copeland Foster &

Mary Lou Davis

&

To the entire Foster-Copeland and Davis families

I dedicate this to you.

Thank you for giving me the courage to pursue my dream.

Thank for being my support system when I wanted to give up.

Thank you for your unconditional love.
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Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.” Faith is what brought me here today and without Him I would not have made it this far. I thank God each day for the strength to go after and achieve this dream.

There is one word that describes my journey – humbling. I learned very quickly to let go of my pride and to accept constructive criticism as teachable moments. In all honestly, I almost didn’t think I would get here. There were many sleepless nights, time away from family and friends, and financial sacrifices that were made in order to make this dream a reality. I am so grateful to those around me who encouraged me to stay the course when I felt like life was passing me by.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT........................................................................................................................................2

DEDICATION....................................................................................................................................4

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..................................................................................................................5

LIST OF TABLES................................................................................................................................11

LIST OF FIGURES.............................................................................................................................11

CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM........................................................................................................12

Introduction.......................................................................................................................................12

College Student Affairs......................................................................................................................15

Influences on Hiring Managers’ Screening Processes................................................................. 18

Applicants’ Education Background.................................................................................................18

Technology.....................................................................................................................................19

Summary..........................................................................................................................................21

Conceptual Framework......................................................................................................................21

Screening Theory.............................................................................................................................26

Mental Models.................................................................................................................................28

Biases in Screening Decision-Making............................................................................................29

Summary of Conceptual Framework...............................................................................................31

Problem Statement..........................................................................................................................32

Purpose Statement and Research Questions..................................................................................34

Significance of the Research Problem.............................................................................................34
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 40
Scope and Organization of Review .............................................................................. 41
Decision-Making in Screening Processes .................................................................... 42
Role of Mental Models in Screening ............................................................................ 49
Technological Influences on Screening ....................................................................... 50
  Virtual Human Resources ......................................................................................... 50
  Online Schools ......................................................................................................... 51
Screening in College Student Affairs .......................................................................... 54
  Traditional and Proprietary Schools ......................................................................... 58
Career Trajectory .......................................................................................................... 60
Limitations and Conclusions ......................................................................................... 63

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

Research Methodology ................................................................................................. 65
Research Design ............................................................................................................ 69
  Role of the Researcher .............................................................................................. 70
Participants .................................................................................................................... 72
  Sampling ..................................................................................................................... 73
  Recruitment ................................................................................................................ 74
  Selection ....................................................................................................................... 76
Data Collection ................................................................................................................ 79
Concluding Thoughts………………………………………………………………………………188

REFERENCES……………………………………………………………………………………189

APPENDICES……………………………………………………………………………………202

A Recruitment Letter……………………………………………………………………………202
B Informed Consent Form……………………………………………………………………..204
C Recruitment Survey…………………………………………………………………………..207
D Interview Protocol 1……………………………………………………………………………208
E Interview Protocol 2……………………………………………………………………………211
F Job Description 1………………………………………………………………………………213
G Job Description 2………………………………………………………………………………214
H Job Description 3………………………………………………………………………………215
I Confirmation of Participation…………………………………………………………………216
List of Tables

Table 1: Sampling Matrix…………………………………………………………………….. 79
Table 2: Protocol for Coding Qualitative Interviews……………………………………… 94
Table 3: Matrix of Participant Demographics……………………………………………… 109
Table 4: Summary of Participant Profiles………………………………………………… 110
Table 5: Summary of Findings ………………………………………………………………… 117
Table 6: Summary of Summary of Preferred Schools……………………………………… 121
Table 7: Summary of Interview Assessments……………………………………………… 156
Table 8: Summary of Mental Models’ Influence on Screening Process………………… 175

List of Figures

Figure 1: Basic Decision-Making Processes Based on a Mental Model……………… 25
Figure 2: Hiring Managers’ Mental Models for Screening Education Backgrounds…………………………………………………………………………………………………… 26
Figure 3: Basic Decision-Making System…………………………………………………… 44
CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

The college student affairs (CSA) profession has often struggled to establish its identity within higher education (Hughley & Burke, 2010; Nuss, 2000; Sandeen, 2004). The CSA profession developed out of a need for higher education professionals who could provide co-curricular and social services for students (Ambler, 1993; American Council on Education [ACE], 1937). For many years the profession followed *in loco parentis*, a Latin term meaning “in place of the parent,” to describe the role of student affairs professionals on college campuses (Lee, 2011). Early positions in student affairs, such as the Dean of Men and Dean of Women, were created on college campuses to provide parental-like supervision of students (Mann, 2010). However, it was not until 1937 and the publishing of the Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV) that student affairs began to evolve into a recognized profession working in collaboration with faculty in support of students (ACE, 1937; Doyle, 2004; Mann, 2010; Nuss, 2000; Roberts, 2012). The SPPV was the landmark document that facilitated the creation of professional standards in CSA, and organizations such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs (CAS Standards), and the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (Roberts, 2012). Adoption of those professional standards was instrumental in defining the type and scope of work of student affairs professionals and the preferred education background for individuals who desire employment in the field.

In the 1960s, the profession shifted its position from an emphasis in student support services, and moved to having its professionals possess educational backgrounds in student
development theory (Doyle, 2004; Dungy & Gordon, 2010; Nuss, 2000). The shift to
credentialing and professionalization in CSA furthered the debate surrounding the focus of
academic preparation programs, the academic degree which professionals should possess, and
the acceptance of new graduates into the profession (Hughley & Burke, 2010). Hughley and
Burke (2010) and Kretovics (2002) asserted that it is necessary for professionals in college
student affairs to have an appropriate academic background to meet the needs of students outside
of the classroom. Today, most professional positions in college student affairs require a master’s
degree from a graduate preparation program in college student affairs, counseling, or higher
education administration (Kretovics, 2002; Young & Janosik, 2007). While Cooper and
Saunders (2000) suggested that holding a master’s degree from a preferred program in student
affairs increased one’s employment opportunities, no existing research has investigated how
different credentials are viewed in the employment screening process.

Scholars have suggested numerous reasons why hiring managers in college student
affairs should seek out professionals that possess a master’s degree. Creamer, Janosik, Winston
and Kuk (2001) asserted that master’s degree programs instill certain knowledge and
competencies within its graduates that are necessary to be successful in student affairs.
Graduates of preparation programs are grounded in human development theory and they
understand how it applies to the development of the students they serve (Young & Janosik,
2007). Further, graduates of student affairs preparation programs understand the theoretical
constructs of cognitive theory, psychosocial theory, and person-environment theory (Young &
Janosik, 2007), which are the key principles of college student development that guide student
affairs practitioners in their work with students.
Even though research has shown what qualifications are required to enter the profession, questions still exist amongst leaders in student affairs about what to look for in a student affairs preparation program (Herdlein, 2004). Thus, hiring managers are left on their own to evaluate which applicants are most appropriate for positions in college student affairs. Graduate preparation programs in student affairs are the training ground for new professionals to work in departments such as student activities, residence life, Greek life, and admissions (Kuk & Banning, 2009). These departments are led by hiring managers of varied titles. Examples of hiring managers’ job titles include associate vice president, dean, associate dean, assistant dean, director, and Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) (Winston & Miller, 1991).

Hiring managers act as gatekeepers, bearing the responsibility of determining how applicants are screened for positions in student affairs (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Krevotics, 2002). Further, hiring managers preferences can influence which applicants are ultimately hired for a position because they often write the job description and determine which qualifications are used to screen an applicant. However, with the increased presence of master’s degrees offered online and by proprietary schools, and the implementation of web-based screening processes by human resources departments, hiring-managers’ screening decisions are often influenced by other external factors (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Buckley, Minette, Joy, & Michaels, 2004; Chapman and Webster, 2003).

Screening of applicants’ education background is a major component of the hiring process (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973; Stiglitz, 1975). However, the problem with screening applicants’ education background is the lack of knowledge that hiring managers may have about online and proprietary schools’ graduate programs in student affairs and its implications when conducting search processes in student affairs. This study will investigate hiring managers’
screening processes and how one’s biases and perceptions about an applicants’ education background influence their screening decisions. These biases, whether positive or negative, are often based on factual information and personal beliefs held by hiring managers about an applicant’s education background. These biases and perceptions, which are held by hiring managers, represent their individual mental models, which can ultimately influence their decision-making when screening applicants’ education background (Chermack, 2003; Korte, 2003). Thus, mental models and screening theory will provide the conceptual framework that will guide this study and serve as a lens to understand how hiring managers’ biases and perceptions, e.g., mental models, influence their screening of applicants’ for positions in student affairs.

**College Student Affairs**

The student affairs profession has capitalized on increased higher education credentialing by using the master’s degree as a condition for employment. Human resources and/or hiring managers use higher education credentialing to screen out less qualified applicants (Kretovics, 2003). Credentialing describes a practice used by employers that requires applicants to meet specific education qualifications to be considered for employment (Beaver, 2009; Brint, 2006). Taylor (2010) asserted that credentialism has pushed more individuals to pursue a post-secondary education as a result of increased demand from employers raising the education qualifications for positions. Moreover, credentialing theory suggests that by furthering ones education that it will lead to better employment opportunities (Auster, 2011).

With society’s demand for higher education academic credentials, there are many more schools, traditional and proprietary, offering degrees; therefore, there is an oversaturation of the job market with individuals who have college degrees (Bankston, 2011). Hiring managers must
now evaluate applicants from traditional schools as well as graduates who have earned degrees at proprietary schools. Traditional schools are accredited, non-profit colleges and universities that deliver the majority of their degree programs face-to-face on a physical college campus.

Proprietary schools are accredited, publicly traded colleges and universities that operate for a profit with their offering of degrees (Auster, 2011; Beaver, 2009; Honick, 1995; Kinser, 2006; Kirp, 2003). Commonly called for-profits or online schools, proprietary schools are known for delivering their degree programs primarily online.

The perception of an applicants’ education background can vary depending on whether applicants obtained their degree at a traditional school or a proprietary school (Adams & DeFleur, 2004, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Many scholars have studied the employability of individuals with online degrees in higher education (Adams & DeFleur, 2004, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011), but they have not studied, specifically, the employability of individuals with degrees earned from proprietary schools. Many traditional schools are better known in the field of student affairs because they are part of a network of schools that have affiliated themselves with a community of professional student affairs organizations like ACPA and CAS. ACPA and CAS provide much of the academic criteria traditional schools follow to develop graduate preparation programs in student affairs. However, proprietary schools, who do not have a strong presence within those student affairs organizations, present concerns about whether their graduates are as employable as their traditional school counterparts. For example, ACPAs membership schools consist primarily of traditional schools, and list only one proprietary school in its 147 institutional memberships (ACPA, n.d.). Additionally, CAS has no listing of any proprietary schools as one if its member institutions on its website (CAS, n.d.). With proprietary schools lack of presence in the professional organizations that set the guidelines
for student affairs’ preparation programs, it suggests graduates from proprietary schools are less credentialed than traditional schools.

Proprietary schools use their ease of access to obtaining degrees, to those who need credentials for employment, as adding value in one’s higher education qualifications. Proprietary schools, who tend to have lower admission standards than traditional schools, have capitalized on their ability to provide easy access to working adults who need some type of credentials for employment (Beaver, 2009; Kinser, 2006). Additionally, proprietary schools’ have been effective at enrolling economically disadvantaged and minority students who view a college degree as their pathway to achieving better employment (Beaver, 2009; Kinser, 2006). Therefore, adults who do not have the time to take face-to-face classes or gain acceptance into traditional master’s degree programs, often obtain degrees online at proprietary schools to advance their career. By proprietary schools making their institutions more accessible to students who lack the financial resources and/or academic preparation to attend a traditional school, they have made the dream of achieving better employment opportunities a possibility (Auster, 2011; Beaver, 2009; Honick, 1995; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). However, student affairs has not addressed the presence of proprietary schools in higher education and have shown little interest on the impact proprietary schools’ graduate programs have had on educating new professionals (Auster, 2011; Beaver, 2009; Honick, 1995; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004).

With access to higher education expanding to reach more students, hiring managers must now look for other credentials to narrow the applicant pool when screening for positions (Bankston, 2011). Many hiring managers screen applicants’ education background based on the type of credentials they earned and their opinions on the type of school attended (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011; Walters, 2004). In student affairs, many
hiring managers screen applicants to see if their graduate program is associated with professional student affairs organizations (Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007). Although compliance with CAS is voluntary (Kuk, et. al., 2007), schools that follow those standards are able to signal to hiring managers their graduates have credentials from a preferred graduate preparation program (Mable & Miller, 1991). This is one way in which hiring managers can determine whether an applicant’s master’s degree program has prepared him or her to meet the recognized professional standards for careers in student affairs.

**Influences on Hiring Managers’ Screening Processes**

Hiring managers generally have some level of knowledge about the different types of master’s degree programs offered by traditional schools in order to screen for applicants’ education background. Hiring managers may not have a thorough understanding of the graduate programs offered by proprietary schools; thus, leading them to formulate their own opinions about the quality of an applicant’s educational background. However, hiring managers may often rely on their mental models, such as their perceptions, biases, and opinions, when it comes to the school where applicants’ received their master’s degree. Therefore, hiring mangers’ mental models become apparent when screening applicants’ education background (Korte, 2003).

**Applicants’ Education Background**

Hiring managers’ employment decisions are often influenced by an applicants’ education background as one of the criteria in screening applicants. In the past, possession of a post-secondary education has been one way applicants have demonstrated to hiring managers they are qualified for a position (Stiglitz, 1975). Moreover, an applicants’ education background delineate the requisite skills the applicants possess, and those required in the position job
description (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973). Hiring managers’ mental models suggest how they screen student affairs positions, applicants’ credentials from various graduate programs, and the type of school applicants attended. Hiring managers’ mental models lend credibility to the type of school, traditional or proprietary, they want applicants to graduate. Hiring managers’ mental model toward type of school and applicants’ education background are often evidenced throughout the screening of applicants. Thus, hiring managers rely on their mental models in the screening process to evaluate applicants’ education background.

Hiring managers also look to student affairs organizations to ascertain differences in applicants’ education credentials. For example, graduate programs that affiliate with student affairs organizations, such as ACPA and NASPA, can stand out from other graduate programs that do not follow professional standards within student affairs. Hiring managers who prefer applicants who have graduated from student affairs preparation programs that have adopted those professional standards may form biases that influence their screening decisions. Some hiring managers recognize that graduate schools who adopt professional standards in student affairs are certifying that their students have completed a curriculum that is grounded in student development theory (Miller & Winston, 1991). Whereas many traditional schools are affiliated with ACPA and CAS, most proprietary schools are not (ACPA, n.d.; CAS, n.d.); thus, leading one to believe that their lack of affiliation is an indication that their programs lack the known quality of traditional schools’ programs.

**Technology**

Advancements in technology have also played a significant role in hiring managers’ screening applicants’ education background. In recent years, human resources departments have taken on more of the hiring manager’s screening process as they have implemented technology to
streamline the application process (Chapman & Webster, 2003). Many applicants apply for job postings online as opposed to submitting their application materials through the mail. Electronic applications often require applicants to upload their resume’, reference list, and transcripts online to apply for a position. Electronic application submission eliminates the manual handling of application materials by hiring managers. The electronic process of screening applicants is called virtual human resources (VHR), where the human resources department uses technology to receive application materials, and to facilitate applicants’ screening process. VHR is the face-to-face function of human resources departments performed using the internet and web-based processes within an organization (Bennett, 2009).

With the implementation of VHR key functions that were once the sole responsibility of hiring managers have been expanded and placed under the Human Resources Department purview. VHR through electronic screening is used to screen applicants’ application materials, and determine which applicants meet the qualifications of advertised positions. With VHR, some hiring managers are only charged with screening applicants during the interview process since the VHR process has narrowed the applicant pool through its initial screening. The VHR initial screening often includes the utilization of key words or phrases noted in applicants’ application materials (Buckley, Minette, Joy, & Michaels, 2004; Chapman & Webster, 2003). Those key words or phrases that VHR screens for are often determine if applicants meet the minimum qualifications for a position (Buckley, Minette, Joy, & Michaels, 2004; Chapman & Webster, 2003). However, use of VHR does not totally eliminate hiring managers’ mental models in screening applicants for entry-level student affairs positions.
Summary of Introduction

Screening applicants’ education background is an important part of the hiring managers’ search process when filling positions in student affairs. With increased access to proprietary schools, and a variety of delivery methods, online and brick and mortar, hiring managers have choices of applicants’ education background. Those choices include applicants’ academic credentials earned from traditional schools or a proprietary school. In differentiating between the types of schools, the screening process also involves hiring managers considering other factors accompanying applicants’ education background. Other factors may include whether their academic credentials are supported by CAS standards and the school and/or applicants’ affiliation with student affairs organizations, such as ACPA and NASPA. These factors can influence what hiring managers look for in screening applicants for positions in student affairs (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973). Additionally, VHR plays a part also in screening applicants for student affairs positions. However, all criteria hiring managers use in screening applicants’ education background is unknown. Hiring managers’ mental models toward one’s academic credentials and where applicants attained such credentials are often major factors in their screening decisions for applicants in student affairs positions. Hiring managers’ use of mental models to influence screening applicants for student affairs positions compels the use of mental models and screening theories as the conceptual framework for this study.

Conceptual Framework

The goal of this study is to understand how hiring managers’ biases and perceptions, e.g., mental models, towards applicants’ education background influence their screening decisions for positions in student affairs. The screening process applied by hiring managers to evaluate applicants’ education background can reveal how applicants’ education is valued and determine
which academic credentials are preferred in the profession. Hiring managers not only use screening processes to evaluate applicants, they can also use it to reinforce the culture, goals, and mission of an institution. Screening applicants is an important step in the decision-making process for determining which applicants are best for a position. However, screening does not reveal how hiring managers develop their preferences to choose one applicant over another. Further, applicant screening does not identify hiring managers’ specific biases and perceptions in student affairs, and how they may influence their evaluation of applicants from traditional schools versus those who attended proprietary schools. Mental models, a decision-making process, represent hiring managers’ biases and perceptions which inform how they screen an applicants’ background.

Screening theory and mental models will serve as the conceptual frameworks for this study to understand how hiring managers evaluate applicants’ education background for entry-level positions in student affairs. Screening theory, a decision-making process, is used by hiring managers to reveal and evaluate applicants’ skills and abilities, including their education credentials (Arrow, 1973). Mental models are the cognitive images that represent the biases, preferences, and assumptions of individuals when they engage in decision-making (Chermack, 2003). Screening theory, by itself, is insufficient to evaluate applicants’ credentials. It does not fully explain hiring managers’ evaluation process when emphasis is placed on applicants’ possession of a post-secondary education as one of the determining factors in making decision. Mental models provide fuel to the decision making processes, and fill the gaps in decision-making. Hiring managers’ opinions and biases are significant influences in the evaluation an applicant’s credentials, including those in their education background. Thus, this conceptual
framework will inform how mental models influence screening decisions when hiring managers evaluate applicants’ education background for entry-level positions in student affairs.

Chermack’s (2003) decision-making system, steeped in mental models, was adapted for this study to provide a lens for understanding how hiring managers’ mental models influence their screening decisions of applicants. Chermack illustrates in Figure 1 how decisions are made by overlaying a basic decision-making process model with mental models. Chermack demonstrates how mental models influence the type of decisions that are made by indicating how one’s biases and other variables reflect the attitudes of the decision-maker, which are “constantly being adjusted, refined, and recreated in dynamic and ever changing environments” (p. 410). Chermack asserts these attitudes are one’s mental models, which develop as a result of the decision context and the environment of the problem that is being solved. These environmental factors are key influencers in the model; thus, hiring managers’ mental models are influenced by the experiences and background of the decision-maker and their environment. As the experiences, opinions and environment for the decision-maker change, so does the feedback provided for each decision. Each experience encountered by the decision-maker influences the type of feedback that goes into the decision-making model’s input and output. Therefore, the feedback loop that connects the input and output represents the changing mental models of the decision-maker, which results in the constantly changing process of ideas, perceptions, and decision-makers’ biases used to influence one’s decisions and how those decisions are made.
Figure 1. Basic Decision-Making Model Based on a Mental Model (Chermack, 2003, p. 415)

Figure 2 is an adaption of Chermack’s model which illustrates how mental models influence how applicants’ education background is evaluated when hiring managers screen applicants for positions in student affairs. Mental models highlight a gap that exists between screening theory and hiring managers’ decision-making. Chermack (2003) depicts in Figure 1 how mental models are embedded in the environmental context of decision-making, whereas Figure 2 suggests that mental models are directly linked to the screening process of applicants’ education. This researcher asserts that while there is a direct connection between one’s environment and the creation of mental models in Figure 1, Figure 2 reflects that there are specific mental models that one creates that are particular to evaluating an applicant’s education. Without understanding the specific mental models of a hiring manager, understanding how screening decisions are made and how they have been influenced by one’s biases and perceptions can be a challenge. Therefore, identifying mental models a specific part of the process model
allowed this researcher to understand their specific influence on the elements within the screening process.

Figure 2. Hiring managers’ mental models for screening education backgrounds. Adapted from Chermack’s (2003) basic decision-making system based on a mental model (p. 415).
Figure 2 depicts how external factors in one’s environment can influence a hiring manager’s biases, perceptions and opinions, e.g., mental models. When screening applicants’ education backgrounds, hiring managers create a cognitive mental map of what characteristics they prefer for applicants. Those mental models are used to screen the education/academic credentials of applicants in order to narrow a pool of candidates for a position.

**Screening Theory**

Screening theory is a process used by hiring managers to make employment decisions based on education (Arrow, 1973). Arrow (1973) also used term filtering to describe screening theory. Spence (1973) developed a similar theory, called signaling theory, to describe how applicants use education to show their abilities to employers. Education screening is also how hiring managers determine which applicants meet the qualifications for a position (Chermack, 2003; Korte, 2003). Arrow (1973) and Spence (1973) both posited that screening is a form of credentialing used by hiring authorities to determine also which applicants are more productive than others.

However, screening theory is different from signaling theory because screening theory requires hiring managers to base their decisions on the academic background of an applicant. Dobbs, Sun and Roberts (2008) noted that signaling and filtering are sometimes used to describe how employers make distinctions between applicants’ education background. In signaling theory, applicants indicate their value to employers by using their education to reflect their skills (Spence, 1973). Similarly, filtering illustrates an applicant’s potential as an employee by using education to indicate to hiring managers how to separate individuals who have higher skills from those who do not (Arrow, 1973).
According to Dobbs et.al. (2008), screening theory attempts to determine one’s potential productivity as an employee by answering the following questions:

1) How do employers determine an employee’s productivity based on their training and education?

2) How can employers tell if someone is more productive than someone else?

3) What does education and training say about someone’s productivity? (pp. 791-792)

Arrow (1973) posits hiring managers determine a lot about an individual’s productivity based on where they went to school. When screening applicants, hiring managers use what they know or perceive about one’s background. This knowledge or perception could be about the type of school an applicant attended, proprietary or traditional school, or the type of degree one attained, which become a part of a hiring managers’ screening process. Those perceptions, along with other biases towards applicants’ education background, (e.g., professional affiliations, grades earned in school, prestige of master’s program), influence hiring managers’ screening processes (Stiglitz, 1975). The intent of screening processes is to determine what an applicant is worth as an employee by using their education background as an indicator of their potential (Dobbs et.al., 2008).

In some instances, technology can influence how applicants are screened for positions in student affairs. Screening is no longer a process limited to hiring managers’ scrutiny of an applicant’s academic credentials when determining whether they meet the criteria for a position. Many colleges and universities have implemented applicant management software to manage job search processes for individual departments within the institution. Applicants are now screened by human resources departments before being screened by hiring managers (Chapman & Webster, 2003). Moreover, some hiring managers are now becoming less involved with
applicant screening processes because of the ability of computer software applications to screen applicants using computer software. These software applications used by human resources departments can identify key words in an applicant’s employment packet, which signal to the hiring managers whether or not the applicant has the appropriate skills for a position (Buckley et al., 2004; Chapman and Webster, 2003).

**Mental Models**

The main purpose for screening is to evaluate an applicants’ education and determine whether an individual has the potential to be successful in a position. However, mental models represent the biases and perceptions held by hiring managers that influence screening decisions toward applicants’ education background. Kenneth Craik, influenced by the works of Jean Piaget and Charles Sanders Pierce, developed the concept of mental models in 1943 (Johnson-Laird, 2004). Piaget (1950/2001, 1967), who introduced the concept of developing mental processes in his work with children and how they construct knowledge about the world, laid the foundation for how one’s background and experiences can influence their decision-making. Craik (1943/1967) furthered Piaget’s concept of these mental processes by asserting that the mind creates mental images “in small scale models” (p. 61). In education screening, these images represent hiring managers’ ideas about what they believe are the best qualifications for student affairs applicants.

According to Craik (1943/1967), mental models are the mental representations of the cognitive images of one’s perceptions of what one believes or knows to be true. Often called cognitive maps or mental maps, these mental images can represent an individual’s opinions, beliefs, and biases (Chermack, 2003; Johnson-Laird, 2004). Student affairs hiring managers can develop these same cognitive maps when screening applicants. Johnson-Laird (1983, 2004), a
major contributor to the study of mental models, suggests that mental models are based on a set of assumptions that are derived from one’s personal beliefs. Johnson-Laird and Byrne (1991) posited in mental models theory of reasoning that one’s beliefs are a direct result of an individual’s deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is not logical, but based on a particular set of assumptions. Further, these assumptions which are influenced by an individual’s experiences, background, and environment can be used by hiring managers in student affairs to draw certain conclusions about an applicant’s education background.

Forrester (1961, 1988), founder of systems dynamics, was first to apply mental models to a general systems theory to create a decision-making process. General systems theory is a model concept which connects the cognitive images of one’s mind with an “open system” that is influenced by one’s surroundings and affects the input and output (Bertalanaffy, 1972). Forrester (1998, 2010) developed a systems model to analyze behavior systems and describe how complex problems within an organization are solved by incorporating a circular system of intricate internal feedback loops that show how environmental factors cause changes that can influence one’s decisions. Moreover, Forrester (1961, 1988) was able to illustrate how these complex problems are solved by showing how mental models are a critical factor in influencing changes within an organization.

**Biases in Screening Decision-Making**

Applying systems theory to decision-making processes can also reflect biases held in hiring managers’ screening. Perceptions, opinions, and biases held within hiring managers’ mental models can play a significant role in screening processes, yet how they influence decision-making is unknown. Mental models represent hiring manager’s subconscious image of what they believe to be an ideal applicant, which may not be based solely on their educational
background. Other factors, such as the school where their degree was awarded, whether the program of study was delivered online or on a physical campus, the education background of the hiring manager, and the culture of the campus where the position is located can all be used to influence the context of the decision being made.

The creation of mental models is not a perfect process for screening applicants for employment because they can change over time, depending on who is making the decision, what their individual experiences may be, and the environment in which the decision is being made (Korte, 2003). According to Chermack (2003), an individual’s mental models are based on “biases, values, learning, experiences, and beliefs about how the world works” (p. 410). Overcoming these biases in education screening is a challenge for many hiring managers who bear the responsibility of determining which applicants are the most qualified for a position. Biases can influence the decision-making process of hiring managers when screening applicants for a position (Korte, 2003). Once biases and preferences are formulated as part of a hiring managers’ mental model, changing them becomes extremely difficult (Chermack, 2003).

Korte (2003) noted that biases in decision-making typically fall into four different categories:

1. Prior hypothesis and focusing on limited targets: Decision makers who base their decisions on prior beliefs in order to obtain a particular outcome.
2. Exposure to limited alternatives: Decision makers who rely on intuition instead of making rational decisions.
3. Insensitivity to outcome probabilities: Decision makers who make decisions based on subjective judgments.
4. Illusion of manageability: Decision makers who are too optimistic and believe they can control the outcome of their decisions. (p. 443)

Korte (2003) asserted that categories one and two represent many of the biases hiring managers might face when screening applicants for positions in student affairs. In education screening, hiring managers must assess their opinions about the various types of schools that exist to determine their mental model for education screening. In student affairs, applicants’ academic credentials can be earned from traditional and proprietary schools, schools with open and competitive admission, and public and private schools.

Many hiring managers perpetuate biases in decision-making because they rely on their intuition and evaluate information inconsistently, while maintaining preconceived opinions about an applicant’s education background (Chermack, 2003). For example, hiring managers who perceive proprietary schools to be unequal in quality to traditional schools because of negative images portrayed about them in the media, can create biases that establish mental models that are preferential towards applicants from traditional schools. Therefore, mental models based on biases and perceptions towards a particular type of institution can have a direct impact on the types of applicants who are selected to be interviewed and ultimately hired for a position.

**Summary of Conceptual Framework**

Screening theory and mental models both illustrate how hiring managers’ decision-making processes are influenced by an applicant’s education background. It is understood that applicant screening is part of hiring managers’ decision-making process, however what is not understood is how hiring managers’ make their screening decisions. Mental models provide the mechanism for hiring managers to gain greater understanding about how the ideas, perceptions, and biases that exist in their subconscious play a role in their decision-making. When screening
theory and mental models overlay with each other, they provide insight into what preferences hiring managers look for in applicants’ education background for positions in student affairs and how those preferences influence their screening decisions. Moreover, this conceptual framework provides a greater understanding into what hiring managers value in applicants’ education background and the particular screening preferences they carry in their subconscious.

**Problem Statement**

Given that little is known about what factors go into screening applicants for positions in student affairs (Kretovics, 2002), greater understanding is needed regarding the type of education background necessary for professionals to enter into the profession. Many student affairs professionals have struggled with the fact that there are no required professional standards for graduate preparation programs (Hughley & Burke, 2010; Nuss, 2003). One result of this lack of mandatory standards has been the increased availability of preparation programs at proprietary schools, which Dungy and Gordon (2004) and Hughley and Burke (2010) assert has been ignored by student affairs leaders. The impact has put the burden on hiring managers who are ultimately responsible for determining the industry standard for which type of educational background applicants should possess in the profession.

Hiring managers often look for more than just possession of a master’s degree from a preferred preparation program; they are likely looking for evidence of fit within the student affairs division and the institution. Based on what is known about the importance of having a master’s degree from a graduate preparation program in student affairs, we know that hiring managers initially screen an applicant’s academic credentials to determine whether they meet the education qualifications for a position. However, what is not known are hiring managers’ mental models which influence how applicants are screened for positions in student affairs.
Given the high regard hiring managers have towards applicants from traditional graduate programs (Creamer et al., 2001; Kuk et al., 2007) and the absence of consistent practices in applicant screening, this study proposed that hiring managers rely on their perceptions and opinions about an applicant’s background to determine who is selected to be interviewed and eventually hired for a position. These perceptions and opinions, which are hidden and not articulated verbally, represent the mental models hiring managers use to screen an applicant’s education background (Chermack, 2003). Therefore, this study is necessary to identify and understand how hiring managers’ mental models influence how applicants’ are screened for positions in student affairs.

Numerous gaps exist in the literature have failed to address how changes in the student affairs profession, the expansion of proprietary schools online and the use of technology in application processes have impacted applicant screening. Over the past 15 years only a few studies have investigated biases in screening applicants’ education background (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Bolton, 2010; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Additionally, there has been little research on the impact proprietary schools have had on applicant screening in student affairs. Therefore, the goal of this study is to understand hiring managers’ mental models for applicants in student affairs and to learn how they are used to screen an individual’s education background for master’s degree level positions in student affairs.

This study aims to understand the role of mental models in the job search process by investigating how applicants are screened by student affairs hiring managers at traditional colleges and universities. By focusing on hiring managers across a diverse group of institutions who have the responsibility of hiring and supervising professionals in student affairs, there is an opportunity to gain understanding about what perceptions and biases exist towards applicants by
those who are considered to be gatekeepers to the profession. This study will accomplish this task by employing a qualitative method to gather data from hiring managers at different colleges and universities about their perceptions concerning what they look for while screening applicants for entry-level positions in student affairs.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ screening of applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States. The following research questions guided this study:

1) What are hiring managers’ mental models for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

2) What is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Hiring managers’ screening of applicants is a process that is not clearly understood, yet it plays a significant role in determining whether someone is perceived as qualified for a position. While it is known that hiring managers use an applicant’s education background to screen for positions in student affairs, hiring managers’ preferences regarding the types of applicants they are screening for in a student affairs job search process are not known. These preferences, described as mental models, represent the cognitive images that are created by hiring managers subconscious to make screening decisions (Chermack, 2003). Despite numerous attempts within
the student affairs profession to define which qualifications are preferred to work in the field (Creamer et al., 2001; Kretovics, 2002; Miller & Winston, 1991a; Winston & Miller, 1991), there has been no recent research on what hiring managers in student affairs are looking for today.

This study provided an opportunity to identify what hiring managers are screening for in applicants and to share this information with various constituents who are affected. By investigating the mental models of student affairs hiring managers, greater understanding about what type of background is valued amongst hiring managers in student affairs can be attained. This information is valuable to the student affairs profession on several different levels. It acknowledges that the delivery of higher education has changed and that student affairs must address how it will respond to online schools and degree programs as a method of attainment of academic credentials. Further, it will allow student affairs professionals to recognize whether or not there is a culture of bias in the profession that prefers one type of applicant over another based on how and/or where they attained their credentials. Finally, faculty at graduate preparation programs can use this information to determine what hiring managers are looking for and assess whether or not their graduate programs are meeting the needs of the profession.

**Positionality Statement**

As a graduate of a graduate preparation program in student affairs from a traditional school, I have questioned where proprietary schools fit into the student affairs community of professionals. Graduate programs at proprietary schools now offer degrees to prepare graduates for careers in student affairs, yet their graduate students and student affairs professionals are not seen in large numbers participating in student affairs organizations. Moreover, I recognize that my biases are a result of my experiences working in college admissions with students who have
transferred from a proprietary school to a traditional school and how it could negatively influence any screening decisions I might make in the future. As the primary researcher for this study, it is important to acknowledge my perceptions towards proprietary schools. Additionally, I must acknowledge that as I question the value of proprietary schools, I also respect the fact they are known to provide numerous opportunities for women, minorities, non-traditional, and economically disadvantaged students to pursue a higher education. Conducting this study will allow me to address my own personal biases by identifying experienced hiring managers’ mental models and revealing how they influence how applicants’ education backgrounds are screened. To reduce my bias in this study, my goal is to remain neutral during this study and not divulge my personal or professional experiences with proprietary schools with any of the study participants.
Definition of Terms

**Bias** - represent factual information and/or intuitive beliefs about an applicant’s education background that subconsciously influence one’s decisions

**Brick-and-mortar** – represents the physical campus space where classes are delivered face-to-face

**Capital** – is a form of power that individuals can acquire that is either material, cultural, social or symbolic (Swartz, 2007).

**Carolinas** – a term used to define the North Carolina and South Carolina region within the United States

**Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO)** - the senior student affairs administrator responsible for leading the division of student affairs

**Credentialism** – a practice where people believe that having a college degree or academic credential will level the playing field in the job market (Brint, 2006).

**Cultural capital** – represents the “general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills” that are passed down amongst generations (MacLeod, 2009, p. 13).

**Elitism** – the level of status and prestige associated with colleges that are seen as prestigious.

Elitism occurs on a continuum and will include non-profit schools

**For-profit** – commonly used name to describe proprietary schools

**Hiring manager** – a student affairs professional who is a mid-manager or higher that has the responsibility of supervising a staff and replacing employees when a vacancy occurs

**Mental Models** – are the mental representations of the cognitive images of one’s perceptions of what one believes or knows to be true. Mental models represent an individual’s opinions, beliefs and biases (Chermack, 2003; Johnson-Laird, 2004).
Online school – an institution that does not deliver its academic programs on-ground in a physical classroom; instruction is delivered virtually using the internet

Practitioner – an individual who is master’s degree level professional in student affairs

Proprietary school – are private, investor supported colleges and universities that operate as profit-driven businesses and are known for delivering the majority of their programs online

Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO) – A senior level administrator in the division of student affairs. Individuals would be considered a senior level manager.

Screening – The process used by individuals to create a criterion that will allow them to make narrow a pool of applicants in order to identify the top candidate

Signaling – a practice where education is used as a mechanism to indicate to employers that someone has the skills or credentials necessary for a position

Social capital – associated with class and represents the social networks and connections of individuals who come from a particular social class. These networks are obtained through relationships and experiences with people who have affiliation with certain communities.

Student affairs – also known as student development and student services; encompasses professional and support staff employed on the administrative side of college campuses. These individuals are responsible for providing services and support for college students. Departments in student affairs include admissions, financial aid, counseling, minority student services, Greek life, academic advising, etc.

Student affairs professional – these are masters level staff members with backgrounds in student personnel, student services, counseling and other related degrees. They are experienced in the college student development and counseling theories necessary for providing support for college students
**Traditional school** – a not-for-profit public or private college or university that delivers the majority of its programs on-ground in a classroom
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ screening of applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States. The following research questions will guide this study:

1) What are hiring managers’ mental models for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

2) What is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

Introduction

Screening applicants for professional positions in student affairs is a decision-making process that encompasses numerous steps. These processes include the content of hiring managers’ mental models, which guide their thought processes when screening applicants, to the use of technology in human resources offices to screen which applicants meet the minimum qualifications for a position. Many student affairs leaders continue to ask what qualifications are most important to hiring managers when screening applicants for positions in student affairs (Herdlein, 2004; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). Much of the literature indicates that one’s education background is a major component of the screening process and in determining who should be considered for a position (Herdlein, 2004; Krevotics, 2002).
Credentialism in student affairs has played a significant role in determining which applicants are considered for positions in student affairs. By requiring applicants to possess a master’s degree, more attention must be given by hiring managers’ towards screening of one’s education background. However, education background includes more than just possession of a master’s degree to signify that one is qualified for a position. Applicants’ academic credentials, specifically, the type of degree earned, where the degree was attained, whether the graduate program is preferred, and the reputation of the program can influence a hiring manager are just some of the screening criteria that can be used to make a decision. However, much of the connection between an applicants’ educational background and hiring mangers’ decision-making in screening have been assumed and not empirically studied (Bills, 1988a).

The empirical studies that have investigated the role of education in applicant screening processes by hiring managers have been limited. Thus, this chapter will survey the literature that discusses how hiring managers develop their screening decision process used to evaluate applicants for entry-level positions. Very few studies have investigated how hiring managers’ screen applicants. Therefore, a review of the literature that discusses screening processes used in hiring managers’ decision-making is essential to understanding the phenomenon of mental models and the impact on hiring managers’ screening processes. This researcher hopes to fill that gap with this study.

**Scope and Organization of this Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to understand how hiring managers’ mental models influence screening decisions of applicants for entry-level positions in student affairs. To lay the foundation for this study, this literature review will include four sections: (1) screening
theories’ decision-making processes, (2) mental models and screening, (3) technological screening, (4) screening traditional and proprietary schools, and (5) career trajectory.

All of the literature was compiled using the Snell Library at Northeastern University. The following databases were utilized for this chapter: ProQuest Dissertation and Theses, JSTOR, SAGE Social Science Collections, Google Scholar, and ERIC using EBSCOhost. Additionally, popular publications from sources such as The Chronicle and the website Inside Higher Education were used to collect current information about proprietary schools. The literature was gathered using multiple searches with keywords and combinations of keywords. Included in the search terms were student affairs, proprietary schools, for-profit schools, online schools, higher education, preparation programs, mental models, career pathways, screening theory, hiring practices, social capital, cultural capital, decision-making, and human resources development.

**Decision-Making in Screening Processes**

Screening applicants’ education background is only one aspect of the decision-making process used by hiring managers when narrowing a pool of applicants for positions to be filled. The process used to narrow a pool of applicants includes weeding out those who are less qualified in order to establish a group of applicants who meet the preferred qualifications for a position (Brown, 2001). In some instances, applicants will screen themselves before a process begins by evaluating their own education background against those required for a position and choose not apply because they do not possess the minimum credentials (Bills, 1988b). At other times, applicants who do not meet the educational requirements, and still apply, are eliminated by hiring managers who disqualify them for not meeting the minimum educational requirements for a position (Bills, 1988b).
Decision-making is an important part of the screening process in student affairs. Figure 3 is one example of a basic decision-making process used to screen applicants. Decision theory is an approach based on general systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). General systems theory is formulated on a set of “models, principles, and laws” that involve open systems that are connected by relations or “forces” (Von Bertalanffy, 1972, p. 411). “A system may be defined as a set of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment” (Von Bertalanffy, 1972, p. 417). Based on this particular model, hiring managers screening decisions are influenced by their experiences and therefore, engage in a decision-making process that relies on their perceptions about a particular applicant.

The primary reason for many applicants’ consideration for a position by hiring managers is their possession of a post-secondary education (Bills, 1988a, 1988b, 2003; Sullivan, 2001; Walters, 2004). Many researchers have used credentialing, cultural capital, and human capital theories as a lens to understand how hiring managers screen applicants’ educational credentials for employment (Bills, 1988a, 1988b; Sheridan, Slocum & Buda, 1997; Walters, 2004). Bills
(1988a) suggested each of these theories influences hiring managers’ perceptions of one’s educational background when determining whether an applicant meets the requirements for a position.

Bills (1988b) noted screening is closely connected to applicants’ education attainment and is used in hiring managers’ process to determine whether an applicant meets certain criteria for employment. Screening is a decision-making process that hiring managers use to sort an applicant’s education attainment, but also the type of education they acquire from certain types of schools (Arrow, 1973; Layard & Psacharopoulos, 1974; Sheridan et al., 1997; Stiglitz, 1975). Credentialing, cultural capital, and human capital theories have also influenced educational attainment, and therefore impact screening decisions by hiring managers. However, studies that have investigated employers’ use of one’s education background to screen applicants for employment have not conclusively determined which theory has the greatest influence on screening decisions. Thus, researchers have used multiple frameworks to understand the role of education when hiring managers screen applicants (Bills, 1988a, 1988b; Walters, 2004).

Walters (2004) conducted a quantitative study on the impact of one’s education on the type of employment attained after graduating from school. This study had two main objectives: 1) To address the theoretical debate amongst researchers regarding the merits of credentialing and human capital theories and 2) To continue to expand past research on academic credentials to see whether individuals’ employment is influenced by the type of education obtained. In credentialing theory, higher education is defined as a requirement that individuals must obtain in order to meet the growing demands of a highly-educated society (Beaver, 2009; Brint, 2006). Human capital theory, on the other hand, represents nontangible competencies that individuals
obtain and later use to receive a personal return on their investment (Dobbs, Sun & Roberts, 2008).

Walters (2004) evaluated data from the National Graduates Survey (NGS) administered to 43,040 graduates from post-secondary education institutions in Canada to determine whether graduates obtained employment related to their academic credentials and if there was a connection between their position and its academic qualifications. Surveys were administered over three months by telephone to students who completed a certificate, diploma or degree program from one of Canada’s universities, colleges or technical schools. Participants were asked questions pertaining to their employment, level of education required for the position, and whether or not their academic credentials were related to their employment. The findings revealed that many individuals were employed in positions that are not related to their academic background.

With regard to the merits of credentialing and human capital theories, both have similar results when it comes to one’s employment opportunities and one’s academic background (Walters, 2004). Credentialing theory demonstrates a strong connection between applicants’ education and the perception one has acquired the academic credentials required for a position (Walters, 2004), whereas human capital theory promotes education as an investment in oneself (Collins, 1979). Credentialing and human capital theories both demonstrate that attaining higher education is one way to secure better employment opportunities (Walters, 2004). However, one’s education background does not guarantee an individual will obtain a position related to their academic credentials (Walters, 2004). The implication for this study suggests that while an academic credential can provide opportunities for employment, hiring managers do not always
select applicants’ for a position because they appear to possess the minimum academic
credentials required for a position.

In two separate studies, Bills investigated the various approaches to educational screening
when used by hiring managers to hire and promote applicants. In the first study, Bills (1988a)
investigated the relationship between an applicant’s academic credentials and how employers
hire and promote applicants. In the second study, Bills (1988b) investigated the relationship
between an applicant’s academic credentials and how employers screen them for job promotions.

Bills’ first study questioned hiring managers’ perception of an applicant’s educational
credentials and their job performance using human capital, cultural capital, screening and
credentialing theories. Bills conducted interviews with six hiring managers and 12 employees in
six different businesses who selected each employee to promote and/or hire. Each hiring
manager provided feedback about the employees selected to hire, including the characteristics of
the employees selected for promotion, and those who were not selected. Additional interviews
were given to the human resources departments’ personnel and people internal and external of
each of the businesses that hired personnel. The findings revealed that hiring managers do not
believe that education is the sole or primary reason applicants obtain the necessary skills for
employment. Only 20% of the hiring managers interviewed believed that having an education
was necessary to obtain the skills needed for employment (Bills, 1988a, p. 444). Bills found
when screening for internal positions, hiring managers indicated that they did not believe an
applicant’s education was necessary to provide the skills needed for a promotion (Bills, 1988a).

While Bills (1988a) found that an applicant’s academic credentials were not the primary
reason for being selected for a position or promoted, the hiring managers believed education was
important to providing general skills necessary for a job. Bills (1988a) posited that hiring
managers “probably exaggerate the emphasis that employers actually place on educational credentials in staffing decisions” (p. 446). Bills found hiring managers believe that an applicant who possesses a higher education is an asset for a job; however, they welcome other information about an applicant if it is available. Bills asserted there may be other factors used when screening applicants. Therefore, the implications for this study suggest that one’s education may not be the only factor in how hiring managers make screening decisions.

In the second study, Bills (1988b) evaluated the screening process used by hiring managers when evaluating applicants. Using the same theories, e.g., human capital, screening, credentialing and cultural capital theories, Bills investigated how to determine who made better employees for internal and external positions. Bills collected qualitative data from new hires and the hiring managers who made each of the hiring decisions. The interview questions developed for this study were open ended so participants could freely share their experiences. Each of the participant’s responses were coded and placed into six different categories: personality, communication skills, job history, experience, schooling, and other. Each applicant in the study had their academic credential, along with other characteristics, compared with each of the other applicants. The purpose was to see whether or not the hiring manager hired an external applicant or promoted an internal applicant and determine whether the hiring manager evaluated the characteristics differently.

Bills (1988a, 1988b) raised the question about the role of education in hiring managers’ screening processes and described credentialing, screening, cultural capital, and human capital theories as competing frameworks to understanding the process hiring managers use to make screening decisions about applicant’s credentials. According to Bills (1988a), all of the theories
discussed are primarily accounts of how employers evaluate educational credentials when they have little other information on the productive capacity of potential appointees (p. 442). The findings from both studies (1988a, 1988b) suggested that while an applicants’ education background is important to being considered for a position, it is not the sole reason hiring managers select an applicant. Education screening is not a predictable process where applicants can assume they will be considered for a position because they have the required academic credentials. Walters (2004) found that recent college graduates with four-year degrees did not always obtain employment in a position related to their education background. The implication for applicants in student affairs is that having a master’s degree in a student affairs preparation program will not guarantee employment in the profession. Moreover, hiring managers may look beyond one’s possession of an academic credential and use other criteria that are not known in order to make screening decisions.

Summary

In summary, possessing a master’s degree from a student affairs preparation program does not guarantee an applicant will meet the academic qualifications for an entry-level position in student affairs. Many hiring managers use an applicants’ education background to assess whether or not an individual has the appropriate requirements for a position (Walters, 2004). However, education may not be the only criteria used by hiring managers to screen applicants’ qualifications (Bills, 1988b). Hiring managers also use education to eliminate some applicants from consideration and occasionally exaggerate its importance during the screening process (Bills, 1988b). One’s educational background may be viewed differently by hiring managers depending on the position they are hiring for and how a hiring manager values an applicant’s academic credentials (Walters, 2004). Thus, this researcher posits that hiring managers’ mental
models are one response to determining how hiring managers screen the academic credentials of applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs.

**Role of Mental Models in Screening Processes**

Decision-making processes in human resources are not immune to bias (Korte, 2003). According to Korte (2003), decision-making is not a rational process. Hiring managers carry assumptions and biases about applicants that influence their screening decisions about one’s academic credentials and whether they meet the requirements for a position. It is through these assumptions and biases held by hiring managers that formulate the mental models that influence how hiring managers screen applicants for positions. Mental models represent a developmental decision-making process that exemplifies the biases, preferences, and assumptions held by hiring managers while screening (Chermack, 2003). Mental models are not a decision-making process specific to human resources (Chermack, 2003). According to Johnson-Laird and Byrne (2001), it is a reasoning process used for identifying a cognitive map to identify the beliefs and biases that will inform one’s decision-making process.

Mental models can promote bias in screening (Korte, 2003). Mental models are the assumptions and opinions constructed by those making decisions which become central to how these mental images are applied (Korte, 2003). These mental images represent a cognitive lens for how people see the world (Craik, 1943; Forrester, 1961; Piaget, 1950/2001). Therefore, educational screening by hiring managers can take on many different outcomes depending on the assumptions and biases a hiring manager holds. However, these biases exhibited through hiring managers’ mental models are limited in the literature, thus exposing a gap of knowledge about how hiring managers make screening decisions.
Technological Influences on Screening Processes

Hiring managers’ screening processes have also been influenced in recent years by the increased use of technology within higher education. One influence has been the introduction of online application processes. Many human resources departments have begun to rely on the web-based programs to manage the job search process for hiring managers. Another influence on screening has been the introduction of online degree programs offered by proprietary schools. Both technological advances have impacted the how hiring managers conduct the applicant screening process and the perceptions of how applicants’ credentials are evaluated.

Virtual Human Resources

Decision-making processes within human resources departments have evolved into using technology as a tool to automate the screening process of applicants for hiring managers (Buckley, et.al., 2004; Chapman & Webster, 2003). Many organizations have minimized the manual hands-on process of applicant screening by hiring managers and placed the responsibility of identifying qualified applicants with human resources. Applicants must submit their application materials to the human resources department, who is responsible for evaluating their credentials, and removing anyone from the pool of applicants who does not meet the minimum qualifications. Applicants who meet the minimum qualifications for a position have their applications forwarded to the hiring manager in charge of the job search process. The process of using technology to assist with screening applicants’ education background is part of a new innovation in human resources called virtual human resources (VHR) (Bennett, 2009). VHR automates face-to-face functions of human resources departments by using the internet to assist with the application process (Bennett, 2009).
VHR can have a direct impact on the type of applicants who are screened for positions in student affairs by taking on the function of hiring managers screening applicants’ education background and other qualifications. Human resources departments have incorporated technology into the screening process by using human resource management software to determine whether an applicant is qualified for a position. If an applicant does not meet the minimum requirements that the management software program deems necessary, they can be eliminated from search process. That means that some hiring managers may not know that an applicant has applied for a position before they are removed from the applicant pool.

Organizations that use a VHR application process can also influence what types of applicants are considered for student affairs positions by utilizing a process “web-based screening,” which narrows a pool of applicants based on key word searches through a computer application (Buckley, et.al., 2004; Chapman & Webster, 2003). Web-based screening consists of screening applicants’ application, resume’, and other documents using automated searches of key-words or phrases. For example, a search could be set up to identify words such as student personnel, ACPA, higher education, or advising. Chapman and Webster (2003) assert web-based screening eliminates race, gender and socioeconomic bias in applicant screening, in addition to reducing the cost of interviewing unqualified applicants.

**Online Schools**

The increased presence of proprietary schools offering degrees earned online is also impacting hiring managers’ screening processes. In screening applicants’ education credentials, hiring managers are often influenced not only by an applicants’ education, but where that applicant earned their academic credentials. Degrees attained from online schools continue to raise questions and concern for some hiring managers when screening applicant’s education...
background (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Despite proprietary schools representing some of the largest providers of online degrees, hiring managers remain uncertain about the quality of education they provide (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Hiring managers must decide whether applicants with credentials from proprietary schools will be considered equal to credentials earned at traditional schools when screening applicants’ education background for positions in student affairs.

Where an applicant attained their degree and the type of school attended (e.g., traditional or online) can influence hiring managers’ decision making processes (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Tsui, 2003). Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) investigated online master’s degree preparation programs and found that hiring managers in student affairs valued face-to-face classroom experiences from applicants for positions in student affairs over a college degree earned online. Further, 76.6% of the hiring managers perceived online programs unequal to traditional schools’ on campus degrees (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011, p. 81). Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) concluded, while some hiring managers would consider hiring someone with an online degree if everything else was equal, the majority of hiring managers preferred to hire someone from a traditional face-to-face, brick and mortar student affairs preparation program. Thus, hiring managers’ value the hands-on experiences attending traditional programs can provide and do not believe that online programs in student affairs can prepare practitioners as well.

Adams and DeFleur (2005) conducted a study that had similar findings regarding the acceptability of online degrees. Adams and DeFleur focused their study on hiring managers’ perceptions of applicants with online doctoral degrees for faculty positions at traditional schools. In their study, hiring managers expressed preferences for applicants from traditional doctoral
programs where applicants earned a degree on a college campus in a face-to-face classroom with a professor as opposed to an online doctoral degree program with no on-campus experience. Adams and DeFleur (2005) concluded, when given the opportunity to choose an applicant with a degree from a traditional school or an applicant with a degree from an online school, 98% of the hiring managers preferred doctoral degrees earned in a traditional classroom (p. 78). Online doctoral degrees were not considered to meet the appropriate educational requirement by hiring managers despite applicants having equal credentials as applicants with degrees from traditional doctoral programs. Adams and DeFleur found faculty preferred applicants who attended classes face-to-face because of their concerns about cheating, the quality of the instruction, and the accreditation of online degree programs.

In 2006, Adams and DeFleur investigated whether hiring managers were accepting of degrees earned online. The investigation did not just look at online schools that were proprietary. It also investigated online degrees that were offered by traditional schools. In this particular study, hiring managers were asked if they would give an applicant who earned a degree online the same chance as someone who earned their degree in a classroom. A total of 96%, or 258 out of 269 hiring managers, preferred a traditional college degree (Adams & DeFleur, 2006, p. 38). Further, 72%, or 204 out of 269 hiring managers, said the type of degree earned (e.g., traditional and online) was an important characteristic when screening applicants (Adams & DeFleur, 2006, p 39). Adams and DeFleur (2005, 2006) and Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) concluded that hiring managers who had little knowledge about the value of degrees earned online exhibited biases while screening applicants’ who had obtained an online degree. Similarly, Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) found hiring managers screening
applicants for professional positions in student affairs perceived online degrees unequal to degrees earned at traditional schools.

**Summary**

In summary, hiring managers’ mental models expose the beliefs, biases, and misconceptions about applicants from online schools education background. When confronted with applicants with similar academic credentials, although one is from a traditional school and the other earned online, hiring managers look more favorably upon applicants with credentials earned from traditional schools (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Technology has heightened this potential bias towards applicants by using web-based screening tools to limit the types of academic credentials that are able to be considered for positions in student affairs by determining in advanced preferred criteria (Chapman & Webster, 2003). Thus, human resources departments may contribute to the biases of hiring managers’ towards screening processes by using technology to determine which applicants are considered for entry-level positions.

**Screening in College Student Affairs**

In the past 30 years, student affairs administrators have investigated what applicants’ education background and characteristics to screen for when hiring professionals in student affairs. Lovell and Kosten (2000) synthesized 23 empirical studies from 1967 to 1997 in a meta-analysis, a methodological tool used to combine the results of several different studies, and revealed three common characteristics used when hiring student affairs practitioners. Over the course of that time, skills, knowledge, and personal traits/quality topped the list of characteristics found to be most important for student affairs practitioners. In their analysis, “academic background”, which was placed under the characteristic “knowledge” in the analysis, was only listed third on the list of importance. Moreover, out of 23 studies, the phrase “academic
background” was only mentioned in three studies (13%) when identifying pertinent characteristics for student affairs professionals (Lovell & Kosten, 2000, p. 562). Lovell and Kosten concluded from the analysis that future research was needed to address the advancement of technology so that its impact in student affairs could be investigated regarding how it might affect the future of the profession. Further, the implication for Lovell and Kosten’s study is that more research needs to be conducted to determine what hiring managers are screening for when evaluating applicant’s education background for positions in student affairs.

Additional student affairs research indicates that there is an interest in the profession to understand how hiring managers screen applicants and what characteristics are sought after in one’s background (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011; Cooper & Saunders, 2000; Gordon, Strode & Mann, 1993; Herdlein, 2004; Kretovics, 2002). Many student affairs hiring managers rely on professional standards and academic credentials to determine which applicants are most suitable for a position (Cooper & Saunders, 2000; Kretovics, 2002; Miller & Winston, 1991/1991c). While the master’s degrees continue to be a required credential for positions in student affairs (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011; Kretovics, 2002; Kuk, Cobb & Forrest, 2007; Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Young & Janosik, 2007), researchers do not agree on what hiring managers should screen for when evaluating applicants’ education background. CAS standards (Cooper & Saunders, 2000; Young & Janosik, 2007) and competencies learned from preferred graduate preparation programs (Herdlein, 2004; Kretovics, 2002) have both been touted in the student affairs profession as important qualifications for applicants in student affairs to possess.

Kretovics (2002) argues that Lovell and Kosten (2000) failed in their meta-analysis by only analyzing past research that focused on what student affairs professionals found to be important competencies to be successful in the profession. Kretovics (2002) suggested there is...
gap of knowledge in the student affairs field regarding what educational background is necessary for entry into a master’s degree level position. Kretovics (2002) furthered the work of Lovell and Kosten (2000) in order to determine what education background was preferred by hiring managers who screen applicants’ education background for positions in student affairs.

Kretovics (2002) administered 750 surveys to student affairs hiring managers conducting job placement screening at an annual ACPA conference. A total of 168 survey participants responded to 17 questions about various competencies related to working in student affairs. Each hiring manager participating in Kretovics’ study ranked in order of importance each of the competencies held by most hiring managers. Out of the 17 characteristics identified as important characteristics for professionals in student affairs, hiring managers ranked #1, relevant assistantship experience while in graduate school; #2 was possession of a master’s degree in college student personnel; #9 was overall academic reputation of the institution; and #10 was reputation of the graduate program. Additionally, Kretovics noted that hiring managers in Residence Life emphasized particular importance in the reputation of the graduate program where the applicant attained their degree.

The implications from this study demonstrate that the type of degree (e.g., master’s degree in college student personnel) earned by the applicant was more important than the reputation of the graduate program and school. However, as noted previously by Adams and DeFleur (2005, 2006) and Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011), the reputation of traditional schools is much greater than proprietary schools. This would suggest that applicants who attain a degree from a traditional student affairs program would be considered more favorably in hiring managers screening of applicants’ education background. However, this may not be consistent for all hiring managers at every school. Krevotics (2002) further asserted that “different
individuals and different institutions are often times looking for different characteristics for very similar positions” (p. 917), thus suggesting that education screening by hiring managers cannot be predicted and can vary based on one’s experiences, biases, and perceptions.

Kuk, et.al. (2007) surveyed 60 chief student affairs officers (CSAO), 60 mid-level managers, and 60 teaching faculty to determine their perceptions regarding the skills necessary for entry-level student affairs positions. The purpose of the survey was to investigate whether there was a significant difference in the importance of: 1) The professional competencies of new professionals or 2) The expectations of where the competencies were obtained. The four competencies evaluated included:

1) Competence in individual practice and administrative skills;

2) Competence in professional knowledge content;

3) Competence in goal setting and the ability to deal with change; and

4) Competence in managing organizations and groups. (Kuk, et.al., 2007, p. 679)

The results of this quantitative survey revealed significant differences between each group of participants regarding their perceptions about which competencies are most important for entry-level student affairs professionals. Faculty, mid-managers, and chief student affairs officers agreed on the importance of applicants being competent in their professional knowledge content in their master’s level courses. However, they disagreed about where applicants should obtain that professional knowledge. Kuk et.al. (2007) noted that administrators did not perceive graduate preparation programs to be the primary source for professionals to attain knowledge about their key competencies in the profession. The implication of this study is evidence that graduate programs in student affairs may not be the only factor hiring managers’ screening applicants’ education background. It suggests that hiring managers may rely on other indicators,
in addition to an applicants’ education background, to determine whether or not an applicant has
the necessary skills required for a position in student affairs. Those indicators include factors
such as schools’ accreditation, credentialing of master’s program and content, certification,
licensure, and peer endorsement (Mable & Miller, 1991).

Traditional and Proprietary Schools

Hiring managers exhibit bias when screening applicants from traditional and proprietary
schools (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). The perception
amongst some hiring managers is that online schools are not as credible as traditional schools,
and are therefore less desirable in applicants’ education credentials (Adams & DeFleur, 2005
2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). When given the opportunity to choose between an
applicant with a degree from a traditional school or a proprietary school, hiring managers choose
the applicant with the credentials from the traditional school (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006;
Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011).

A master’s degree in student affairs, counseling or a related program is the minimum
educational requirement for most professional positions in student affairs. However, a degree
attained from a preferred graduate preparation program is more desirable (Mable & Miller,
1991). Preferred means that the graduate preparation program is aligned with professional
standards recommended by organizations such as the Council for the Advancement of Standards
in Higher Education (CAS) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Hiring
managers seeking applicants who meet those professional standards will screen applicants’
education background from preferred preparation programs favorably (Miller & Winston, 1991).
Preferred programs indicate to hiring managers that applicants are knowledgeable about human
development theory and that they understand how it applies to the development of the students they will serve (Miller & Winston, 1991).

Adoption of professional standards, such as CAS, is one way student affairs hiring managers can screen applicants from traditional and proprietary schools. The CAS standards, which were created to assess and improve institutions’ graduate programs’ effectiveness, allow hiring managers to identify preferred master’s level preparation programs (Mable & Miller, 1991). By schools adopting professional standards provided by CAS, applicants indicate to hiring managers they are knowledgeable about certain competencies valued in student affairs. Many traditional schools have adopted CAS standards to differentiate themselves from other graduate preparation programs (Creamer et al., 2001; Kuk et al., 2007). However, the affiliation with CAS in proprietary schools is unknown. In a search of several proprietary school websites, no information was found about any affiliation with CAS.

Additionally, proprietary schools are not mentioned in the much of the literature on hiring managers’ decision-making processes (Lovell & Kosten, 2000). In those few instances when proprietary schools are mentioned, they are only discussed in studies that result in how hiring managers’ prefer applicants from traditional schools when screening applicants’ education background (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Many hiring managers continue to have negative biases and perceptions about proprietary schools; it is either a result of their lack of awareness and/or knowledge about how they operate (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Hiring managers’ perception is that proprietary schools are not seen as the appropriate educational path for aspiring student affairs professionals seeking positions in higher education.
Proprietary schools are different from traditional schools in many ways. Traditional schools place value on things such as school reputation, athletics, and alumni (Lee & Topper, 2006), whereas proprietary schools focus their resources on making profit (Floyd, 2007; Kinser, 2006b, 2007). Graduate programs at proprietary schools main priority is its focus on recruiting students (Cooper, 2008) in order to make money (Auster, 2011; Beaver, 2009; Kinser, 2007). By lowering admission standards and catering to non-traditional students (e.g., minorities, low-income, 25 years of age or older), proprietary schools are able to attract students who would not otherwise be accepted at most traditional schools (Auster, 2011; Beaver, 2009). For example, minorities and women have benefited the most from proprietary online graduate programs (Cooper, 2008). Diverse Issues in Higher Education (n.d.) listed in 2010 – 2011 the University of Phoenix, a proprietary school, as the top institution for awarding master’s degrees in education to minority students and Walden University, another proprietary school, was listed as number two.

**Career Trajectory**

Career trajectories into any given field do not occur by happenstance. Green and Ridenour (2004) noted they are the result of conscious decisions and preparation by individuals who want to enter into a particular field. For example, in the academic field of nursing, the trajectory for academic deans is low (Green & Ridenour, 2004). In order to advance in the ranks, nurses have to meet numerous criteria to demonstrate they have all of the character traits and prerequisites required for the position. Green and Ridenour stated, “An academic dean must have an established record as a nurse educator, clinical specialist, and expert practitioner” (p. 489). Profession ascension only occurs when an individual assesses their abilities and plans how they want to reach their goals (Green & Ridenour, 2004). Therefore, aspiring deans must have
followed a sequence of steps to prepare themselves with the tools necessary to become qualified for such a position.

Not all career trajectories end with an individual obtaining the job they believe they deserve. Gaps in employment are perceived negatively by many hiring managers (Fournier, Zimmerman & Gauthier, 2011). Individuals can sometimes derail their career trajectory by the type of employment they obtain or do not obtain (Kim, 2012). In 2012, Kim’s findings revealed that out of 1555 high school dropouts, only 8% were able to obtain “occupational mobility.” Kim noted that high school drop outs that had a computer in the home and had the most family stability were able to raise the level of their career trajectory and obtain good jobs. What this study demonstrated was that the majority of high school dropouts were negatively impacted by their lack of certain character traits which Kim found to be significant in their ability to have successful and rewarding employment. According to Kim, dropouts’ career trajectories are often hindered by their gender, ethnicity, cognitive ability, lack of a computer, and familial support.

Fournier, et.al, (2011) suggests that one’s background and their employment history can also influence their career trajectory. This study found that gender and age can sometimes promote a downward career trajectory. Fournier, et.al. collected qualitative data on 32 workers with instable career paths over the age of 45 to find out what variables affected the ending of their career trajectory. In this study, Fournier, et.al., found that workers who were unemployed after the age of 45, but had a stable career prior, were still able to see progress because they stayed active doing things that were positive. Workers who were unemployed after the age of 45, but did not have a steady career prior to their unemployment, continued to descend in their
career trajectory. Fournier, et.al., attributed their descent to having to take degrading jobs, family stress, and psychological stress.

In 2006, Moore conducted a qualitative study on a 42 African-American males studying engineering at a predominately white university in the Southeast. Moore wanted to see why so few minority males have a low trajectory into science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers. Moore found that there were five key reasons why minority males who chose engineering as a career were successful. Moores’ findings revealed they: 1) had an interest in STEM; 2) had support/influence from their family; 3) were strong in science; 4) had a great academic experience; and 5) had experienced great program opportunities. Making the decision to go into a STEM career was not something that these students did overnight. Moore’s findings showed that students’ choice to go into engineering was cultivated over a long period of time and without the right background minority students would not choose a STEM career.

Summary of Chapter

In summary, the literature in this review does not provide a complete portrayal of how hiring managers screen applicants’ education background. Everything from having a master’s degree in student affairs (Kretovics, 2002), to having strong competencies in professional knowledge content from a preferred graduate preparation program (Kuk, et.al., 2007), have been identified as qualifications for screening applicants for positions in student affairs. However, what is missing is a deeper understanding about how hiring managers use screening to evaluate applicants’ educational background from traditional and proprietary schools. Hiring managers’ mental models is one explanation for how hiring managers’ decisions are influenced when screening applicant’s education backgrounds. Mental models reflect hiring managers’ perceptions, opinions and biases about applicants’ education background. Many scholars
(Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011) have noted that hiring managers prefer traditional schools and consider proprietary schools to be inferior. However, there is no evidence that supports how hiring managers’ mental models influence their screening of applicants seeking entry-level positions in student affairs. Therefore, this study proposed to investigate and understand how mental models influence student affairs’ hiring managers’ screening processes for applicants from traditional and proprietary schools and how it affects screening decisions for positions in student affairs.

**Limitations and Conclusions**

This literature review exposed numerous gaps of knowledge in how hiring managers screen applicants’ education background. By introducing the education screening processes used by hiring managers, it demonstrated the lack of understanding about the decision-making process and how applicant’s academic credentials are evaluated. Much of what is known about education screening is limited and focused primarily on the premise that hiring managers use an applicant’s possession of an academic credential as the determining factor for whether or not one should be considered for a position. However, evidence shows that hiring managers’ perceptions and biases about an applicants’ education background may also influence their screening decision process.

Many studies have been conducted within student affairs to understand what student affairs hiring managers screening preferences are for applicants. The results of these studies provide no consistent evidence of what hiring managers are screening for when evaluating applicants’ education background. Further, there is no research that explains how hiring managers screen applicants who attended different types of schools, such as traditional schools and proprietary school and whether there is a preference. The conceptual framework of this
study will use hiring managers’ mental models and screening theory to understand how one’s opinions and biases about applicants’ education background influence screening decisions for positions in student affairs. Mental models provide this researcher a model about how to understand the gap of knowledge that exists between education screening and decision-making processes. Hiring managers’ mental models provide insight into the cognitive images required for student affairs practitioners that will help this researcher understand how decisions about applicants’ education background influence who is considered for employment.

Therefore, this study will investigate hiring managers’ education screening processes using a qualitative research design. Its purpose is to understand how hiring managers’ mental models are used to screen applicants’ education background. Specifically, it will investigate how hiring managers screen applicants’ education from traditional and proprietary schools. The findings of this study will contribute to the gaps in the literature surrounding questions about what education backgrounds are preferred in student affairs and whether or not traditional and proprietary school applicants are screened the same. This study will also contribute to the body of literature on the significance of mental models use in the screening process. The results of this study will be helpful in understanding how master’s degrees from traditional schools and proprietary schools are screened by student affairs hiring managers. Additionally, it will provide graduate preparation program faculty important information about what competencies are most important for graduates of master’s degree programs. Chapter 3 will outline the research methods for this study and provide the steps used to investigate this issue.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ screening of applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional colleges and universities in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States. The following research questions were used to guide this investigation:

1. What are hiring managers’ mental models for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

2. What is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

Chapter three will discuss the research methods chosen by this researcher to investigate this study. This chapter provides an overview of the study and includes the following sections: research methodology, role of the researcher, research design, sampling and recruitment of participants, data collection, data analysis, limitations of the study, data storage and destruction, trustworthiness, and IRB Approval and Protection of Human Subjects.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is a way of thinking about and studying social phenomena (Merriam, 2009). The type of research methodology chosen for this study was determined by the particular assumptions that I held as the primary researcher (Creswell, 2007; Morrow, 2007). The assumption of this investigator is that mental models represent an element of hiring managers’ screening decisions for professional positions in student affairs. Thus, hiring managers’ mental models have the potential to influence the type of preferences used to evaluate
applicants’ qualifications. My particular interest is to understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ decision-making processes in screening entry-level applicants in student affairs and how they evaluate applicants’ education background. To understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ screening of applicants for student affairs positions, it was necessary for me to investigate the content of hiring managers’ mental models, and interpret those hiring managers’ realities and perceptions of applicants and their education background. Mental models represent hiring managers’ cognitive image (Chermack, 2003; Korte, 2003) of what they perceive to be an ideal applicant for positions in college student affairs. However, it is not until hiring managers’ mental models are applied to applicant screening processes that one is able to understand why hiring managers make certain decisions about applicants and their education background. My assumptions and interpretation of those assumptions helped me establish the appropriate research methodology used in this study.

**Interpretivism**

Interpretivism is a theoretical approach used by qualitative researchers to socially construct the realities of stories told by individuals involved (Butin, 2010; Creswell, 2007). Interpretivism seeks to further one’s understanding about a phenomenon (Butin, 2010; Creswell, 2007). The purpose of this study was for me to understand how hiring managers’ mental models impact their screening decisions of applicants’ for entry-level positions in student affairs. Interpretivist researchers have a worldview where reality is socially constructed (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Thus, they are not looking for a specific answer to a question (Butin, 2010), but instead, their goal is to search for patterns in meaning in order to construct what has happened (Butin, 2010; Morrow, 2005). Furthermore, interpretivist researchers do not believe there is only one reality. Interpretivists believe there can be multiple constructed realities (Ponterotto, 2005).
Thus, interpretivist researchers construct the realities of research participants by allowing them to share their experiences through personal stories (Butin, 2010). Moreover, interpretivism is about how one understands the world and makes meaning from an individual’s personal experiences (Creswell, 2009). As the primary investigator, my experiences as a student affairs practitioner who has served on numerous search committees in student affairs played a significant role in determining what type of study was conducted. Interpretivism, thus, suggests that all investigators accurately and thoroughly document the perspective being investigated (Butin, 2010). My goal as the primary investigator for this study was to make sense of how participants’ mental models influence their screening of applicants for entry-level positions in student affairs. According to Ponterotto (2005), interpretivism is the foundation for qualitative research. Thus, qualitative research was the chosen research methodology for this study.

**Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is a situated activity that consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2005). Qualitative research allows researchers to interpret what they see, hear, and understand (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Walker, 2014). Qualitative research is appropriate methodology when a problem or issue needs to be explored and there is not enough information to understand the nature of a particular problem (Creswell, 2007, 2012). Also, qualitative research allows researchers to build “rich descriptions of complex circumstances that are unexplored in the literature” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 33). Qualitative research provides researchers an exploratory and understanding approach to conduct their research (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Since mental models are internal constructions that develop within individuals’ subconscious, qualitative research was the appropriate research method for me to explore the multiple realities
of hiring managers’ mental models, and to understand how hiring managers’ mental models influence screening decisions. Qualitative researchers “are more concerned with understanding situations and events from the viewpoint of the participants” (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012, p. 10). This involves trying to understand and interpret hiring managers’ experiences and the meaning that results from them (Merriam, 2009).

By using qualitative research, I was able to explore hiring managers’ backgrounds and experiences by using structured and unstructured interviews to gain deeper understanding about this particular phenomenon (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Leech & Ogwuegbzio, 2008; Morrow, 2007; Seidman, 2006). The process of revealing how hiring managers evaluate applicants’ education background resulted from interviews that engaged each participant in a back and forth dialogue, which I interpreted to develop meaning from their responses (Ponterotto, 2005). Further, I was able to investigate hiring managers’ mental models using constructed research questions that guided participant interviews used to explore how hiring managers’ screen applicants for positions in student affairs.

By selecting a qualitative research, I was able to uncover the internal constructions of hiring managers’ mental models from interviews, websites, and other documents they used in their screening process that I gathered from each participant’s campus. Qualitative research begins with the investigator developing research questions that will lead to a particular data gathering strategy. As data accrues, “the analytic strategy begins inductively as the researcher works to understand the meanings of participants” (Morrow, 2007, p. 215). Qualitative studies involve the researcher collecting multiple sources of data in order to develop an understanding about the phenomena, which leads certain themes, patterns, and categories that may evolve (Creswell, 2007, 2009).
This type of research is described as exploratory because of its use of multiple sources of data to understand a research problem (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Merriam, 2009). These sources of data used in this study included interviews, documents, surveys, audio recordings, and other information that I used to construct meaning (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, qualitative research includes: 1) data that is collected in a natural setting; 2) data that encompasses interviews; transcripts, notes, etc.; 3) understanding how things happen; 4) analyzing data inductively; and 5) making meaning from participant experiences (Frankel et al., 2012, p. 427).

**Research Design**

Qualitative research lends itself well to this type of study because it allowed me to incorporate my own experiences and educational background in interpreting and understanding how others make meaning (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The research design chosen for this study was a basic qualitative research design (Merriam, 2009) using a general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2009). This type of design is often referred to as a general or interpretive study (Merriam, 2009; Thomas, 2009). A basic qualitative study is interpretive; therefore, it allowed me to construct meaning from participant interviews and other documents gathered for this study and reflecting inductively on the data collected for analysis (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Basic qualitative studies use an inductive process to analyze data because there is not enough theory to explain the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Thomas (2006) noted that inductive analysis is an approach that uses raw data to arrive at ideas or themes through interpretations constructed by the researcher. Further, Thomas noted that the primary purpose of inductive analysis is to allow the researchers’ findings to emerge from the data.

Qualitative research caters to investigators who are interested in exploring a phenomenon (Morrow, 2007). Qualitative research can be used to explore variables that are not easily
identifiable, have not yet been identified, or topics with minimal or no previous research (Morrow, 2007, p. 211). Maxwell (2005) noted investigators can conduct qualitative research that is either structured or unstructured. Unstructured studies provide the most flexibility because the investigator has the ability to develop their study based on the phenomenon being investigated. However, unstructured studies are probably more difficult to conduct because they take a lot of time and require an experienced investigator (Maxwell, 2005). As a new investor, I chose to conduct this study using a structured approach where all of the steps of the research process were pre-determined. Structured studies require the investigator to determine in advance what they will do to set up their study, how they will collect their data, and how it will be analyzed. By choosing a structured approach I was able to construct specific steps that addressed my study’s research goals and questions (Maxwell, 2005). The next sections outline the steps I followed to conduct this research investigation.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the investigator is critical to understanding participants’ experiences in qualitative research. The investigator serves as the interviewer as well as the research instrument used to analyze data that has been collected (Merriam, 2009). As the research instrument, the investigator is responsible for evaluating and interpreting data using an inductive inquiry process (Merriam, 2009). This process results in the investigator constructing themes from the data that are used to inform the experiences of participants in a study (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

In this study I served as the primary research instrument and was able to bring in my student affairs experiences and higher education background into my analysis of the data. Merriam (2009) asserts that researchers must be immersed in the problem through their
experience or relationship to the research site. Presently, I work in student affairs as a counselor in student services and have served on four search committees during the past year. As the primary researcher in this study, I conducted interviews with this study’s participants and used my background from participating on numerous student affairs search committees to formulate my interpretation of participants’ experiences.

In this study, I conducted face-to-face interviews with each participant. Holloway and Wheeler (2010) suggest the researcher pilot the interview questions prior to conducting the study, which I did. Piloting the interview questions allowed me to practice asking the questions in such a manner to avoid a discomfort for the participant. The pilot also allowed me to determine approximately how much time it would take to conduct each interview. Although I practiced interview questions with one of my professional colleagues in student affairs, when I actually I started the interview process with my participants, I realized that they all did not provide a response to research question three: How do hiring managers’ mental models influence screening of applicants with master’s degrees from traditional and proprietary graduate schools? Therefore, after consultation with my advisor and reviewing responses to the other research questions, research question three was removed during the data analysis phase.

All of the interviews were thought-provoking and engaging, except when some participants appeared uncomfortable with some of the questions about proprietary schools. Corinne spoke very cautiously and carefully when explaining her views about proprietary schools. During her interview Corinne stated, “I think that it’s hard for me…my view of proprietary schools isn’t one that views it in a negative way.” As Corinne spoke, I observed some discomfort in her facial expressions and noted that she started to speak slowly and cautiously when giving her responses. For the majority of Jake’s interview, he was confident
and well prepared with thorough responses for each question. I noted that he read from a printed copy of the interview protocol that I provided as he answered each question. However, when he was asked to provide his definition for proprietary schools and explain what he knew about them, he stumbled with his words, and became short with his answers. For example, Jake said, “I won’t be able to answer that question accurately without having a whole lot of knowledge of what proprietary for-profit schools are all about.” Jake shared that he did not know much about proprietary schools “good or bad” and admitted that he had no opinion about them.

Participants

In qualitative research, researchers often select a small number of participants when conducting a study (Creswell, 2007). I chose six participants to obtain data and to interact with during the interview process. Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

Inclusion Criteria List:

1) Employed at a 4-year, non-profit private or public college/university in North Carolina or South Carolina
2) Employed as a mid-level administrator or senior level administrator in college student affairs
3) Supervises master’s degree level professionals in student affairs
4) Hires or supervises new professionals who have 0-3 years of experience
5) Has earned a master’s degree or higher
6) Has been employed for a minimum of three years in their current position
7) Has served on a minimum of three search committees for master’s degree level positions in student affairs in the past three years
The inclusion criterion for this study was used to compare potential participants who responded to the recruitment survey and snowball sampling processes that is outlined in the Recruitment section.

Sampling

A purposive sample was used to identify participants for this study (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Purposive sampling involves the identifying specific participants and locations to conduct a study based on the type of phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Participants in this study represented a subset a particular population (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002) which included student affairs professionals who were also experienced hiring managers. Purposive sampling allowed me to identify potential participants who met the specific inclusion criteria and could bring deeper understanding to my research problem (Patton, 2002).

I utilized two sampling techniques to identify of participants for this study. The purpose was to have range and variation in the number of potential participants who would meet the inclusion criteria and be invited to participate in the study. The first sampling technique involved accessing the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) database to identify potential participants. The second technique used was snowball sampling. Snowball sampling allows researchers to utilize assistance from personal contacts, or referrals from contacts, to identify participants who may meet the criteria for the study (Fraenkel et.al., 2012; Merriam, 2009).

NASPA is one of the leading organizations for student affairs professionals which that focused on the “advancement, health and sustainability of the student affairs profession” (NASPA, n.d.). NASPA, founded in 1919, has more than 1,200 institutional members, 13,000
individual members, and covers 7 regions that include 50 states in the U.S., 29 countries, and 8 U.S. territories (NASPA, n.d.).

Through my student membership in NASPA, I was able to gain access to their membership database to identify potential participants. NASPA’s membership database includes graduate students, entry-level professionals, and professionals who have years of experience working in college student affairs. Permission to use the membership database was not required because I am a paid member of the organization (K. Skophammer, personal communication, June, 15, 2013). The membership database included the name of NASPA members who have paid membership dues for the current calendar year, the title of the member’s current position, the name and location of the college or university where they are employed, their mailing address, a current phone number, and an email address.

At the time that I began sampling participants, NASPA had 318 professional members in North Carolina (NC) and 171 professional members in South Carolina (SC) (A. Crume & E. Fox, personal communication, July, 15, 2013). NASPA’s membership database is searchable so I was able to narrow my list of potential participants by putting parameters on my search. I chose to narrow the search based on job titles for student affairs professionals who work in leadership positions. I narrowed the title parameter to Director, Dean, Associate Dean, Assistant Dean, Vice-President, and Associate Vice-President. I identified more than 50 professional members in NC and SC who had those titles. I narrowed the sample population even further as described in the Recruitment section.

Recruitment

Each person on my list of student affairs professionals that I identified through the membership database were sent recruitment materials inviting them to consider participating in
this study. The materials included a recruitment letter (Appendix A) and recruitment survey (Appendix C), which I created using Survey Monkey©. Survey Monkey© is an online survey tool that researchers can pay to create surveys, polls, and questionnaires. The recruitment email introduced who I was and how they could help me with my research study. At the end of the email it stated that only a select number of participants would be invited to participate. Additionally, I included that only those participants who met the inclusion criteria would be contacted.

A snowball sample was implemented after the recruitment survey was emailed. Snowball sampling is a purposeful sampling strategy that allows the researcher to identify participants by asking other individuals, or participants, to refer other potential participants for the study (Frankel, et.al, 2012). To implement the snowball sampling process, I contacted several professionals in student affairs, unaffiliated with NASPA, by email to request assistance with identifying potential participants. Only student affairs professionals I had worked with professionally or attended school with at Northeastern University were contacted. I contacted each referral by email and provided the same recruitment materials that potential participants from NASPA received. In their email, I also informed them of who made the referral.

All potential participants from the database and the snowball sampling were asked to complete the survey, which was embedded in a hyperlink, in the email. The hyperlink directed potential participants to the Survey Monkey© website where the survey was located. Study participants being recruited submitted their responses electronically and confidentially directly to me. I stored all responses in a password protected account until I reviewed and evaluated them against the inclusion criteria for participation.
Interested participants responded to closed and open-ended questions about their education background, their supervision of new student affairs professionals, and their search committee experience. Respondents to the survey were asked to include their contact information at the end of the survey if they were interested in participating in the study. I used their signature as affirmation of their desire to participate in the study, if selected. Individuals who were not interested in participating in the study did not have to complete the recruitment survey, and thus were eliminated from consideration as a participant.

Each recipient of the email, who did not initially respond, was sent a gentle email reminder as a follow-up to the initial invite. Fowler (2009) suggests following up with potential participants who do not respond to a request to participate. I chose to follow-up with non-responders within seven days after the initial email was sent. Non-responders were e-mailed a gentle reminder about the study and I provided second invitation by email to complete the survey. Non-responders were given one additional week (seven calendar days) to respond to the second invitation.

**Selection**

A total of 12 surveys were returned from the recruitment survey emailed to NASPA members and five surveys were returned from the recruitment survey emailed to referrals from the snowball sample. Each survey response included demographic and general background information about each potential participant. Participants also answered 10 questions about the institution where they are employed, their hiring manager experience, and their educational background. Out of the 17 respondents to the recruitment survey, six were selected and invited to participate in the study.
Participants were selected based on a sampling matrix (Table 1). The purpose of following a sampling matrix was to ensure there was range and variation in the backgrounds of participants selected to participate in the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Range and variation is a process used by researchers to make sure that there is a diverse group of participants who represent varied perspectives within a particular study (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). The goal of the sampling matrix was to identify 4 – 6 participants. Range and variation and data saturation was achieved after the first six participants were interviewed for the study; therefore, there was no need to interview an additional six participants as noted in the Participant Section. Saturation occurs when a researcher identifies similar responses being reported amongst the interviews that are conducted amongst each of the participants (Creswell, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006).

After I completed the first and second interviews with each participant, my advisor suggested that I interview one or two additional participants. The purpose of including additional participants was to confirm my preliminary themes about hiring managers’ mental models. This process is called a negative cases analysis and it is used by qualitative researchers to confirm any initial findings, categories or themes (Merriam, 2009). I identified one additional participant, which was obtained through the snowball sample, to compare my initial categories. Merriam (2009) noted that using additional data from an interview allows researchers to compare initial findings to see if categories “hold up” (p. 183). Merriam describes this part of the process as being deductive because researchers are looking for evidence to support their findings.

The following is the sampling matrix that outlines the diverse, cross-section of participants that were included in the study. The first column includes the characteristics I was
seeking. The second column includes the quantity of participants I was seeking. The third column represents the participants in the final sample.

**Table 1**

Sampling Matrix

*Adapted from Walker (2013)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quantity of Participants Desired</th>
<th>Quantity of Participants Final Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Institution</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location of Institution</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this study I wanted my participants to be made up of hiring managers that spanned a diverse range of perspectives, so I created the sampling matrix. I followed Maxwell’s (2005) suggested range and variation to create a sampling matrix that would identify hiring managers from traditional schools who represented a broad perspective of student affairs professionals. According to Maxwell, it is necessary to define the “dimensions of variation in the population that are most relevant to your study and systematically select individuals or settings that represent the most important variations on those dimensions” (pp. 89-90). The sampling matrix
sought out professionals who represented different genders, different race/ethnicities, years’ of experience, type of institutions where they are employed and, location of institutions.

After printing out a summary of each recipient’s response from Survey Monkey©, I blackened out any identifying information. Next, I evaluated each response to determine if they met the inclusion criteria for the study. Participants who met the inclusion criteria and the demographics of the sampling matrix were invited to participate in participant interviews in the study. Participants were selected in a manner that provided an equitable distribution between gender, race/ethnicity, and type of institution (Maxwell, 2005).

To choose each participant, I printed each survey response and compared them side by side. I evaluated each their titles for their position, years of experience in student affairs, type of institution where they were employed and the size of institution prior to selecting who would be invited to participate in the study. Initially, four participants were identified from the NASPA database and two participants were identified from the snowball sample. The 7th participant, which was a negative case, was identified from the snowball sample. All survey respondents were not selected to participate in the study for various reasons. For example, some did not meet the inclusion criteria, there were too many respondents from the same school, and some did not add any diversity to the sample. In one situation, I chose a male participant over another male because they were a vice-president and it was important to have a chief student affairs officer represented in the study. In another situation, I chose a participant because they were female and non-white.

**Data Collection**

Interviews were the primary source of data for this study. Additional data for qualitative studies also includes observations and documents (Merriam, 2009). During this study,
observations were made during the interview process when I visited each of the campuses to conduct participant interviews. Documents were also collected throughout the data collection process and included forms used by hiring managers during the screening process, job descriptions downloaded from various student affairs websites, and brochures from institutions where participants were employed.

**Participant Interviews**

The first stage involved face-to-face interviews. The second stage involved phone interviews. The purpose for conducting two interviews with participants was to prevent participant fatigue and to allow each participant to immerse themselves in the questions for each research question. Results of a practice interview indicated that participants might have to endure more than 75 minutes to complete the interview questions for the first research question. Therefore, the first interview was set-up to focus on interview questions for research question 1. The second interview focused on questions for research question 2.

Each participant selected to participate in this study was sent a confirmation of participation email (Appendix I) to schedule their first interview date and time. Second interviews were scheduled after all of the first interviews were completed. Participation was strictly voluntary and no compensation was provided for their participation. Attached to the confirmation email sent to each participant was a copy of the consent form (Appendix B) which had to be downloaded by the participant and signed with an original signature prior to the start of the first interview. Participants who did not sign a copy of the consent form prior to the first interview were provided two additional consent forms to sign when I arrived. One was filled out and stored away securely by me in a lockable storage file and the other remained with the participant.
Interviews were scheduled in no particular order with the first six participants. The first three interviews were with the female participants and the next three interviews were male participants. Prior to starting each interview, each participant was given the purpose of the study and had the consent form read aloud to them. Additionally, I provided each participant an opportunity to ask any questions prior to beginning the interview. Seidman (2006) suggests researchers allow participants to withdraw their consent at any time. Participants in study were informed they had up until the time their two interviews were transcribed that they could withdraw consent.

Interviews should take place in a naturalistic setting of the participant’s choosing (Seidman, 2006). A natural setting was chosen because this is where participants experienced the problem being studied (Creswell, 2007; Fraenkel et.al., 2012). Each participant in this study was interviewed in their office on campus where they were employed. Fraenkel et. al. (2012) suggests that interviews be semi-structured so participant responses can be compared and contrasted with other participant responses. The interview protocol was developed in advance of the interview process. Even though I have experience serving on search committees and screening applicants for positions in student affairs, I could not assume that I knew everything about choosing applicants for positions. Developing open-ended questions kept me from assuming the role of an “expert” by requiring that a list of questions be developed that limit participants’ responses (Creswell, 2007).

Each interview was digitally recorded and followed a scripted line-up of questions that were pre-determined and developed based on the each specific research question for this study (Appendix D & E) (Merriam, 2009). Each interview protocol include a series of open-ended questions that were followed up with probing questions to gain deeper understanding about a
participant’s response after they answered a particular question (Creswell, 2007). The interview protocol for research question one also included three job descriptions for entry-level positions that each participant had to review as part of the first interview (Appendices F, G, & H). Each participant was asked to reflect on each job description and respond to interview questions about what they would look for in a preferred applicant. The job descriptions were provided to each participant prior to their interview and sent by email as an attachment to their confirmation to participate in the study email. Each job description was obtained from the website Higheredjobs.com and de-identified prior to being shared with each participant.

Each interview session was conducted in a manner where the focus would be on the participant and not the interviewer. Each participant was provided a copy of the interview protocol before their interview which allowed them to think about how they might respond to each question. To begin the first interview, I had an opening question to break the ice where I asked each participant tell me about their educational background and their career in student affairs. This allowed each participant to share their professional journey in student affairs and how they came to join the profession. For example, I made sure that I made eye contact and engaged in active listening in order to gain each participant’s trust (Doody & Noonan, 2013). This was important because of the sensitive nature of my research study. I anticipated there might be some uneasiness with participants when discussing elements of the screening process in job searches and did my best to appear neutral during my questions. I was able to do this by listening to each participant’s responses without interruption and only asking questions for follow-up or clarification. Moreover, questions that were created for each the first and second interviews were worded clearly and kept neutral so that each participant would feel comfortable (Doody & Noonan, 2013). This was achieved through my practice interview, which I conducted
earlier in the process. My goal was to establish a rapport with each participant by building on the fact that I relate to them as a professional who worked in student affairs. By the time the second interviews occurred, the participants and I were more relaxed and comfortable with the interview process.

Immediately following each interview, the digital recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. However, the transcripts were not coded until after the first six interviews were completed and transcribed. Transcribing was done by uploading the digital recordings to the website Rev.com. Rev.com is an online professional transcription service used by researchers to transcribe digital recordings. After each interview was transcribed, I verified them for accuracy by listening to the audio of the recorded interview and reading the written transcript. Any errors that were found were corrected so that the written transcripts matched the content of the audio recordings. Each audio recording was played in its entirety a minimum of 4 times.

All digital recordings from participant interviews were uploaded and stored on an external hard drive for my computer and online at Dropbox.com, a virtual cloud used to store files. Both the external hard drive and virtual cloud storage are password protected so that I am the only person able to access the files.

For the first set of interviews I drove to the campuses of Corinne, Solange, Candi, William, Jake and Alan at my expense. The first three interviews were conducted over the course of one month with Corinne, Solange and Candi. The second three interviews were conducted during the following month with William, Jake and Alan. Due to the distant location, the 7th interview with Bethany was conducted by telephone. It should be noted that I have visited her campus, but prior to this study. The first interview focused on interview questions
that were focused on research question one. The average time for each interview was 60 minutes.

The second set of interviews was conducted by telephone. Participants scheduled their second interview by email after the first six interviews were completed. I scheduled each participant interview in the same order that the first interviews were conducted. I conducted each interview in my home or work office, behind closed doors, with the participants at their home office. Each interview digitally recorded. The second interviews asked questions that were targeted towards research question two and the sub research question. The average time for the second interview was 40 minutes.

**Observations**

During the data collection process I kept notes of my observations during the first and second interviews. Written notes about observations are a secondary source of data that qualitative researchers can code and add to their collection of data (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009). My primary observations included the campus environment where each interview was conducted. I kept a notebook throughout the interview process where I could jot down any comments or thoughts while the interview was being conducted. In my notebook I included changes in the tone of voice, facial expressions, comments about the campus environment, and notes about how questions were answered. It was important for me to document my visit to each campus during this study by describing the campus environment, including what I saw, and my first impressions about the institution.

Following each interview I wrote reflective memos to document anything I observed that I felt was important and questions that I had about my initial thoughts regarding responses that I thought were significant. For example, I wrote a reflective memo about Corinne and her response
to my question about her thoughts about applicants from proprietary schools. In my memo about Corinne I stated,

[Corinne] struggled with talking about proprietary schools. I could feel her angst and the uncomfortable feeling had. It was obvious that these were difficult questions and I internalized her discomfort by very carefully asking the questions so as to put her at ease. It was very difficult for her to express her thoughts because she seemed to feel as though she was not giving the right answer. She answered questions slowly and cautiously with hesitation. I had to gently assure her of her right to respond however she felt.

I also wrote other reflective memos for Solange, Candi and William. I found that Solange struggled with “having respect from academic affairs” within her division and felt strongly that applicants with backgrounds from proprietary schools hurt the “credibility” of her department. I also noted in my reflective memos that participants William and Alan both talked about “credibility” of applicants and the importance of having applicants with the right education background.

I wrote field notes where I jotted down my observations in a journal after each face-to-face interview. I took notes before, during, and after each interview to document observations I had about the campus, office of the participant, the campus environment, where the interview was conducted, the level of comfort within the room, and the non-verbal cues of the participant during the interview. According to Fraenkel et. al. (2012) field notes should also include facial expressions, body language, inflections in the participant’s voice, and any other information that cannot be captured on a digital recorder. These notes served as a reminder to me about the experiences that I encountered during the interview process so I could reflect on them later and respond to how they may have influenced each participant during their interview. If there were
any responses that needed clarification from the participant, I made follow-up telephone calls and sent emails asking questions for clarification or additional information.

For example, after my first interview with Corinne, I recorded my thoughts in my journal about the appearance of her campus when I first arrived. I noted that Corinne’s campus was closed for Winter break when her interview was conducted. I also noted that, in my opinion, the entire campus appeared to be no larger than a city block which was enclosed inside a wrought iron fence that met up at a formal entrance where people could enter. The campus seemed “quaint,” with its older looking buildings. The neighborhood where the campus was located looked residential, but upon a closer look I could see signs in the front yards that appeared connected to departments at the school.

Corinne was very personable and engaging during her interview. I described her office in my notes as being “homey” because she had a small couch, personal artwork, and a small bistro table where we sat together for the interview. Corinne was extremely organized. During the interview I jotted down that she had come prepared with typed answers to each question which she read aloud during several during our interview. She told me that organizing her thoughts helped her to make sure that she did not leave anything important out of her responses. I stated in my post-interview reflections that Corinne was very meticulous with her responses and described her response as “careful” and “cautious.”

One area that Corinne struggled with was talking about proprietary schools. I sensed her discomfort as tried to find the right words to say. I noted that talking about proprietary schools was difficult for her so I tried to ease her discomfort by being diplomatic with how I formulated my probing questions. Corinne appeared uncomfortable when she stated that she was not sure she was giving the right answer. I had to gently reassure her of her right to respond however she
felt. She stated that she believed she had a “different opinion than other professionals in student affairs about proprietary schools.” She indicated she felt that faculty had a “wall up against proprietary schools” on her campus. As I probed her further about her perceptions about proprietary schools she appeared more comfortable. My impression was that she felt differently about proprietary schools because she completed her doctorate online. However, her openness towards proprietary schools did not seem to match with the hiring practices in student affairs on her campus. The majority of schools where her staff graduated from with their master’s degrees were large, traditional public colleges and universities. Some of the schools she mentioned were University of South Carolina, Florida State University, Radford University and University of Tennessee.

Other participants seemed to be full of opinions when talking about proprietary schools. They were animated with their voice and became excited with their comments as they recalled stories of experiences they had had with graduates of proprietary schools. For example, when I asked Solange a question about what type of background she would be looking for in an entry-level applicant, without hesitation, she started talking really fast about all of her concerns she had toward about applicants from proprietary schools. I wrote in my reflective memo that she was “expressive” and “she is definitely not a fan of proprietary schools.” Solange’s candor took me by surprise since I had not asked her specifically about proprietary schools. I could tell from the passion in her voice that this is something that she has thought about for a long time.

In my field notes I stated that Solange mentioned she was influenced by faculty on her campus when it comes to hiring professional staff in student affairs. I noted one particular exchange where Solange spoke about her experiences with faculty on her campus and the strong influence they have about the type of people who are hired to work in student affairs. In her
experiences on that campus, Solange spoke at length about the power faculty have on her campus and how they do not hold proprietary schools in “high regard.” My notes stated “credentials are everything.”

After all of the interviews were completed and the findings were identified, each participant was emailed a summary of the results, along with the supporting evidence, to complete the member checking process. I assigned each participant a pseudonym de-identified all of the evidence so that no participant or their institution where they are employed could be identified. Participants were asked to review the summary of findings and determine if they had any alternative interpretations of the data or any corrections regarding the responses that they had made to any of the interview questions. If there were any changes to be made, participants could clarify any statements, make additions or changes to anything they felt was inaccurate, or request that information they disclosed could be de-identified further.

Participants were provided one week from receiving the summary of findings to provide any feedback. Participants who did not respond within one week were contacted again by email and provided an additional week to respond. Five out of seven participants provided feedback by email. Participants were informed if they did not respond to the summary of findings that their non-response would affirm their approval.

Documents

An assortment of documents and artifacts were collected from each participant and the institution where they were employed for this study. According to Maxwell (2005), using multiple sources of data is one way to limit potential bias in the results. This method of using multiple sources of data in a study is called triangulation. Data triangulation is a method used in qualitative research to establish validity and trustworthiness in a study (Patton, 2002).
Triangulating the data allows the researcher to obtain a broader understanding of each participant’s response. For example, when I spoke to Jake about the screening process used when conducting a search committee, he was able to provide copies of actual documents that are used on his campus to evaluate each applicant, in addition to his explanation of the screening process.

Forms participants used to screen applicants were one of the most valuable documents I obtained during this study. These forms helped me to understand how search committees evaluated applicants’ education background and experiences. They also allowed me to reflect on what skills and experiences were most valued in applicants. Other participants like Candi and Corinne also provided evaluation forms used to screen applicants. For example, when I asked questions about how applicants are evaluated, Jake produced copies of the forms used on his campus to evaluate applicants during various phases in the screening process. When Jake provided these documents, I followed along with him while explained how they were used in the process. In my field notes I noted that his institution scored applicants using a Likert scale, which rated their various competencies used in student affairs from 1 – 5. In other parts of the evaluation form hiring managers provided a short narrative about the applicant’s abilities. In reflective memo I wrote that my impression of Jake’s institution was that they were “serious about assessment.” I made this assumption based on the fact that the Human Resources department on his campus created the form and required all departments on campus to use them when conducting a search to fill a vacant position.

Candi and Corinne also provided copies of documents used to screen applicants. William’s school also uses documents to screen applicants, but he was unable to retrieve them from his computer. Candi indicated during her interview that she created her own evaluation
form. Her document scored applicants from “extremely well” to “poor” on various competencies, such as data management, event planning, student engagement and work-flow management. Applicants were also evaluated using open-ended questions like: 1) What was most impressive about this candidate? 2) What was least impressive about this candidate? 3) Please share any additional information that may be helpful in selecting a final candidate.

Corinne did not create the screening documents she provided. Her school used a “Candidate Feedback Form” to collect data on each candidate. On the feedback form, candidates were evaluated on their “strengths” and “limitations.” Additionally, candidates were evaluated on their “readiness” for the position by selecting one of the following options: 1) Recommend; 2) Recommend with Reservations; and 3) Do Not Recommend.

Additional documents that were gathered were collected during the campus interview. I was able to walk through the department where the interview was conducted and pick up documents like campus newspapers, brochures about student services, and information about the campus. Additionally, I visited each campus website where I was able to access campus organizational charts and applications processes from Human Resources departments. All documents were helpful in triangulating data on campus environment, evaluation of applicants and mental models.

**Data Analysis**

The process of analyzing data required me to take multiple steps, which included data that had been gathered through interviews and other documents that had been collected for this study. After I collected all of the data, it was organized by type and coded by me without the use of any software. The data analysis process took an inductive and interpretive approach in its formation of theories and ideas used to explain the data (Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2012; Strauss
& Corbin, 2012). General inductive analysis allows researchers to make interpretations about raw qualitative data that has been gathered to identify concepts and themes that exist (Merriam, 2006; Thomas, 2006). Further, it provides an approach that is appropriate in qualitative studies because the researcher is able to synthesize and make meaning from large quantities of data (Hatch, 2002).

As the primary investigator, I also served as the research instrument used to analyze and interpret the data for this study. Therefore, in order to establish validity for my observations, I utilized a conceptual framework as a lens to guide my interpretation of the data (Butin, 2010). Additionally, I drew upon my professional experiences in student affairs where I have served on various search committees for positions in student affairs (Saldana, 2009). In order to be effective in interpreting the data it was necessary for me to immerse myself in all of the information that was collected (Morrow, 2005). “Immersion in the data begins to take place during data gathering and transcription of interviews. It continues with the repeated readings of transcripts, listening to tapes, and review of field notes and other data” (Morrow, 2005, p. 256).

During the first phase of interviews I met with Corinne, Solange, Candi, William, Jake, and Alan. Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed immediately within 48 hours after I completed each interview. Hatch (2002) suggests that the coding process should begin immediately after the first interview is finished. This allows the researcher to make adjustments to their study based on what information is or is not being provided in the interviews (Hatch, 2002). I chose not to start coding until after the first six interviews were completed.

After the first six interviews were transcribed, I listened to the audio with each transcript to fill in any gaps that were unclear and to make corrections to the transcription. I also used the time to critique myself and my interview style. In my initial findings I realized that my
interviewing skills were weak during my first stage of interviews, which resulted in my inability to ask good follow-up questions when participants made statements that were unclear. Merriam (2006) suggests using “probes” and “follow-up questions” to allow interviewers provide more detail or explanation about thoughts regarding a particular comment. For example, when participants used the word “credibility” I did not ask what the word meant to them. I only realized after I had discussed with my advisor about the several mentions of the word, that I did not get their true definition of the word. Therefore, when I moved onto the second stage of interviews I was able to revisit the previous interview and ask for clarification about what it meant for a school to be credible.

Table 2 provided a visual depiction of the coding process used for this study. There were 13 transcripts that were analyzed, two transcripts for participant’s one through six, and one transcript for participant seven. The steps outlined in Table 2 for coding participant interviews were implemented multiple times. In my first round of coding I separated the transcripts from the two phases of interviews and went through the coding process separately. This was a mistake because I determined that some participants provided data for research question two during their interview for research question one. I went through a second round of coding where I combined all 13 transcripts and treated them as seven separate segments of raw data, and proceeded to identify codes before comparing them with each other and assigning them to categories.

Inductive analysis involves the investigator interpreting the data and placing it into separate categories until a particular theme emerges from the information (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). By analyzing seven transcripts as opposed to treating them as 13 separate transcripts, I was able to identify codes that answered research question one that may have been answered in
the second interview. Analyzing data is a cyclical process which requires the investigator to constantly repeat each step until the researcher has exhausted all possible codes (Saldana, 2009). Coding is an inductive process where the researcher must analyze the data from the transcripts with “an open attitude” in order to identify key ideas that appear to be important (Hatch, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Some researchers suggest that all participant interviews should be completed before the coding process begins (Seidman, 2006). I chose to begin the coding process after the first six interviews were completed.

**Table 2**

*Protocol for Coding Participant Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial reading of transcripts to make corrections, fill gaps of text, and get familiar with data.</th>
<th>Separate segments of text and documents into individual parts.</th>
<th>Assign codes to all evidence (<em>transcripts, documents, field notes, and memos</em>); create codebook with definitions to is created</th>
<th>Common codes are combined and sorted into categories</th>
<th>Express the phenomenon through themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple pages of raw text from interview transcripts and documents</td>
<td>Multiple segments of text</td>
<td>Over 25 Categories of Separated Codes</td>
<td>Narrowed to 10 – 15 Categories</td>
<td>10 themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My first step involved reading the entire transcript, along with the audio recording, to get comfortable with the contents of the data. While going through the first transcript I highlighted key words and phrases that represented descriptive codes. Descriptive codes are words that the researcher uses to summarize sections or passages within the data (Maxwell, 2005). For example, during my analysis of the first transcript I highlighted words like “experience” and “culture.” Each time I re-read the transcript I began to identify more codes and segments of data, which I labeled as descriptive codes.

Codes can consist of a few words or several pages of text that “strike you as interesting, potentially relevant, or important to your study (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). Similarly, Strauss and Corbin (1998) described this part of the process as “chunking”, where the investigator places data into codes and then assigns it a description. I coded each transcript by hand and wrote comments in the margins that summarized my initial thoughts about what I thought each code meant. I also used different colored highlighters to mark key words which I felt were significant. After several rounds of coding, I started to highlight in-vivo codes, which are another type of code used to analyze qualitative data. In vivo codes, which are descriptive, are direct quotes that are taken from participants’ interviews (Saldana, 2009). During the coding process, I also highlighted key phrases, as well as entire paragraphs, as part of the in vivo coding process. For example, if I saw a response to a question that I thought was significant to either research question, or represented a thought that I felt had deeper meaning, I highlighted it and wrote my initial thoughts in the margin. Phrases and words that I highlighted represented the initial codes I identified as significant ideas during my inductive analysis (Saldana, 2009).

As I continued to repeat this process of analyzing each transcript, the codes that I assigned to specific units of data had increased in quantity. As I identified new codes and refined
existing codes, based on my new interpretation of the data, I eliminated codes that no longer had significance to the study (Merriam, 2009). Units of data were broken down into smaller parts and codes were assigned to short phrases or paragraphs (Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2012). After exhausting all codes that could be identified, I developed a code book to define and clarify each codes true meaning. For example, I put the word “flexibility” in my code book because several participants indicated they preferred applicants that were flexible. However, I also put the word “adapt” in my codebook. While conducting my inductive analysis, I realized that because I had not clearly defined each code, I had confused the true meaning behind each word. As a result, I was unable to distinguish between what flexibility meant and what adapt meant. Thus, the evidence that supported each code showed there was conceptual overlay.

By defining flexibility and adapt, and providing examples of both in my code book, I was able to distinguish the evidence that supported each code from one another. In my codebook, I defined “flexibility” as applicants’ ability to do whatever is necessary to do the job. One example of flexibility was shown by Bethany who stated, “At our campus you have to be able to do everything. You have to be able to fax things. You have to be able to move tables.” In my codebook I defined “adapt” as applicants’ comfort level with fitting into a different type of campus environment. Applicants who can adapt must be able to identify with and can adjust to whatever values, goals and beliefs that exist at an institution. One example of being able to adapt is when Alan stated, “We are looking for people that maybe were at a smaller school.” Alan admitted that he had experienced applicants who were uncomfortable adjusting to some of practices at his school. One of those practices was being intrusive in advising students living in the residence halls. Aland explained that applicants who feel uncomfortable engaging in
personal conversations with students about inappropriate behaviors would have difficulties fitting in at his school.

During the second cycle coding, where the researcher analyzes the data for a second time, I introduced the process of axial coding (Saldana, 2009). In my coding process I implemented axial coding only after analyzing the transcripts for each participant multiple times. Axial codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), also called analytical codes, are a result of the researcher grouping together descriptive codes based on the similar connections that they share with each other (Merriam, 2009). As I continued to identify more codes that could be chunked together, I created new categories and listed related codes underneath. In vivo codes were incorporated into the axial coding process before I compared my initial codes with other codes gathered from subsequent participants that shared a similar pattern or meaning (Saldana, 2009). During axial coding the researcher can still identify descriptive codes and in vivo codes. However, axial coding is different than descriptive coding because it can either eliminate, change, or form new codes from the data. Axial coding is inductive and involves the researcher developing new categories where the data can narrowly fall into very specific categories (Merriam, 2009).

My axial coding process did not begin until after Solange’s transcript was coded. I followed the same process used in analyzing Corinne’s transcript. I highlighted descriptive codes and then identified in vivo codes. During the axial coding process I took two different coded transcripts and laid them side-by-side to look at common codes from both participants. My goal was to find the deeper meaning in what each participant was saying. It was hard for me to do this at first because I was too focused on looking at the literal meaning of the codes that I had identified. I had to search hard within myself to find the true meaning of what was being said instead of focusing on my personal knowledge of what I knew about the screening process.
for entry-level positions in student affairs. I realized that each time I read through participant transcripts I gained more understanding about their preferences and beliefs about what type of applicants they preferred for entry-level positions.

To document my thoughts about my interpretation about what I was seeing, I kept a written audit trail in a notebook. I wrote notes to myself prior to each interview, during the interview, and after the interview. After each participant interview, all of my thoughts were documented by composing analytical memos into a word document on my computer. I also kept a digital recorder with me at all times so I could digitally record analytical memos if I was unable to write my thoughts down. I did not transcribe verbatim the recorded analytical notes, but I did write down key ideas that I had about emerging themes from the evidence.

As I repeated the coding process and moved from transcript one to seven, I incorporated axial coding and constant comparison into the process. New codes were added to the code book, placed into categories, and assigned a particular name. Over the course of reading each subsequent interview during the analysis process, the data being analyzed was moved from descriptive to interpretive. For example, once I realized that type of education background was a common code amongst participants, I had to interpret why participants were focused on whether or not applicants attended a traditional school. Participants associated traditional schools with “credibility” which was one of the in vivo codes that was repeated several times through the data. It was during this phase of analysis that categories started to emerge from the data and become more refined after constantly comparing them with one another (Creswell, 2007; Saldana, 2009; Thomas, 2006).

Transcript 2 was evaluated in the same manner as transcript one. I started with the identification of descriptive codes, followed by a second cycle of reading to identify in vivo
codes and additional descriptive codes during axial coding. The second transcript was coded immediately after it had been transcribed, but only after the first interview has been coded. Once the second transcript has been coded for descriptive code and in vivo codes, I began the process of axial coding. I compared transcript 1 and transcript 2 side-by-side to see if there are any common codes between the two. The process of looking for commonalities between two different transcripts is called constant comparison (Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Constant comparison relies on a researcher’s interpretive understanding of the meaning of the various codes and how they connect to one another in order to reduce the number of codes by identifying similar patterns and narrowing them into larger categories (Hatch, 2002). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) constant comparison has three steps: 1) open coding; 2) axial coding; and 3) refining codes. Constant comparison was used throughout the coding process as subsequent transcripts were coded from each of the interviews that have been transcribed. “The goal is to generate a theory, or set of themes” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008, p. 594) from comparing it to each of the previous transcripts until the sum of all transcripts have been compared together.

All transcripts and documents collected for this study was analyzed and coded. Each document was redacted to de-identify participants’ institutional information to maintain confidentiality. According to Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008), constant comparison of data should include all types of information that has been collected for a study, including documents, pictures and observation notes. Because it is viewed as being unscholarly, using other types of qualitative data is often underused by investigators (Butin, 2010). However, when analyzing documents it is important in the data analysis that documents “be linked back to your research questions and the literature review that supported it” (Butin, 2010, p. 99).
After I determined that my findings were almost completed, I wrote a summary of my results with supporting evidence and emailed it to each participant in the study for the purpose of member checking. The findings of this data analysis resulted in 11 themes. Six themes were in response to research question 1 and 5 themes were in response to research question 2. Member checking is when participants are asked to review a summary of findings and provide feedback (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). Additionally, I used the member checking process to clarify any questions that I needed answered. Solange emailed back to say that she was concerned that one of her responses might be identifiable because the names of past schools where she worked were included in the data. She requested that I de-identify her responses further, which I did immediately. Candi requested a follow-up telephone call so she could clarify my questions about the screening process that were not clearly conveyed during her interview. I emailed Candi to set up a mutually agreeable time so that I could ask her additional questions for clarification. I digitally recorded our 20 minute conversation and transcribed it, personally, before including the information in the data. Jake and Bethany were the only two participants who did not respond to my request for feedback.

**Reliability and Validity**

In conducting a qualitative research study, trustworthiness is achieved differently than when conducting quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest using different terms than those used in quantitative research to describe the naturalistic inquiry of qualitative studies to distinguish between the two approaches. In qualitative research, terms such as credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability and conformability are the naturalistic equivalents for internal and external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in quantitative research. Achieving internal and external validity will ensure that a study will be credible. Thus, the objective of this
researcher was to develop a study that was trustworthy and followed specific checks and
balances in order to ensure the findings are valid (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As the primary instrument and researcher for this study, my focus was to collect, analyze,
describe and interpret the data that was collected (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Seidman,
2006). According to Maxwell (2005), conducting a qualitative study does not present the same
reliability threats as quantitative studies. Some of the threats to validity in qualitative studies
include bias in the selection of participants and researcher bias (Fraenkel et al., 2012), therefore
it will be important to address these concerns prior to the implementation of the study.

Qualitative researchers can achieve trustworthiness within a study by controlling any
biases in the study and implementing strategies in their methodology that eliminate any negative
effect on the participants (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) asserts that researcher bias is the
biggest threat to the validity of a study, which Fraenkel et al. (2012) asserts is one of the biggest
concerns for researchers. Fraenkel et al. (2012) further describes validity as the
“appropriateness, meaningfulness, correctness, and usefulness of the inferences a researcher
makes. Reliability refers to the consistency of scores or answers from one administration of an
instrument to another, and from one set of items to another” (p. 147). By implementing a
research methodology that will utilize both internal and external validity strategies this study will
become trustworthy.

**Internal Validity**

Internal validity is achieved through a researcher’s ability to ensure that their findings are
consistent with the type of study being conducted (Creswell, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To
achieve internal validity, I had the recruitment questionnaire evaluated by several student affairs
professionals and colleagues in the Northeastern doctoral program prior to distributing it
potential participants through Survey Monkey©. This allowed me to obtain feedback regarding the quality of the questions on each document prior to its implementation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Maxwell (2005) suggest conducting a mock interview. This allows the researcher to determine if questions need to be changed or if the focus of the question does not appropriately address the research questions. Prior to conducting the first interview, I went over the interview protocol in an informal setting to test the research questions with a colleague in student affairs. Their responses were used to evaluate, revise, and implement a more sound protocol.

Researchers who rely on participant interviews as a sole source of data limit the credibility of qualitative studies. Patton (2002) noted triangulation is a technique used by qualitative researchers to establish validity and trustworthiness in a study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest triangulating the data to provide a way to corroborate the evidence found in the data. Additionally, by using multiple sources of data, the validity of the study was enhanced (Fraenkel et.al., 2012; Maxwell, 2009). Multiple sources of data in this study included interview transcripts, documents used to evaluate applicants, field notes, and reflective memos that were used to validate the findings of this study. Additionally, participants’ interviews were triangulated with other data when I conducted the data analysis for the study.

External Validity

External validity is associated with how a researcher is able to apply the findings of a study and generalize to other situations (Creswell, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although generalization is not possible in qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Meriam, 2009), because of it can be achieved by transferability (Merriam, 2009). Transferability was achieved in this study through range and variation of the study participants (Merriam, 2009).
All transcripts will also be verified by each participant (Fraenkel et al., 2012). This process is done through member checking. Member checking assures trustworthiness of the data. Each participant will be allowed to review and revise their interview responses before analyzing the data (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; Saldana, 2012). Each participant received a summary of the results of their interview which they could review and indicate whether or not it accurately represented their interview. Member checking allows the participant to confirm the accuracy of their interview by allowing them to review a transcription of their interview and adding any additional information that may have been left out (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The purpose of member checking is to allow participants the opportunity to provide feedback to make sure their responses reflect what they wanted to say (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). Further, I listened to the recordings from each interview and checked each transcription for accuracy.

Each hiring manager selected for this study brought range and variation to the participant sample. The range and variation included schools’ location, type of school (private or public), school enrollment, ethnicity, job title, and highest degree obtained. Including range and variation in the backgrounds of study participants, allowed this study to become transferrable (Merriam, 2009) to any public or private, not-for-profit, traditional college or university where hiring managers screen entry-level college student affairs professionals. However, this study may not be transferable to proprietary schools because all of the participants in this study are employed at traditional schools and attended traditional schools. Merriam (2009) noted that external validity can be achieved through knowledge contributions made through of a qualitative research study’s uniqueness. Therefore, the accumulation of knowledge brings awareness (Merriam, 2009) on how hiring managers’ mental models influence the screening of applicants.
Limitations of the Study

This study utilized a membership database affiliated with the National Association of Student Personnel Administration to identify potential participants. Creswell (2008) asserts that all studies have some type of intrinsic strength and limitation. The participants sampled from the NASPA database presented some potential biases and limitations. NASPA is one of the leading organizations for professionals in college student affairs. Participants sampled from NASPA indicated their membership in the organization often influenced who they were as professionals. In this study, participants who were members of shared similar educational experiences and career trajectories.

Another limitation with using the NASPA database is its narrow membership. For many student affairs professionals, membership is cost prohibitive. Only professionals who work at institutions that are able to afford institutional membership and/or sponsor members of its student affairs staff to NASPA are able to benefit from the resources provided by the organization. Therefore, to mitigate the potential for bias, I conducted a snowball sample to identify additional participants with no affiliation to NASPA. Snowball sampling allowed me to diversify the backgrounds and affiliations of hiring managers to include student affairs professionals who may have had different experiences. I contacted colleagues I knew in the student affairs profession, who did not have an affiliation with NASPA, to recommend potential participants. I forwarded recruitment surveys to several professionals who were not affiliated with NASPA to invite to participate in this study. Ultimately, three participants unaffiliated with NASPA and four participants affiliated with NASPA participated in the study (see Table 4).
Data Storage and Destruction

All digital data was de-identified and stored on the primary researcher’s password protected external hard drive and computer. Additional files were stored on a virtual cloud online in password protected account at Dropbox.com. Any distinguishing characteristics about the institution or participant were de-identified using pseudonyms. Any printed copies of transcripts, written notes, handouts or files, collected data and artifacts were stored in secured, lockable cabinet (Seidman, 2006). All de-identified transcripts will be retained three years after the study is concluded. All digital recordings will be destroyed within one year. Consent forms signed by each participant will be retained and stored within a lockable file for three years. The printed copies of all transcripts and documents will be shredded either after five years or the data is no longer valuable for scholarly publications or presentations.

IRB and Protection of Human Subjects

Several steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of each participant. The first step was to obtain approval from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The goal of the IRB is to ensure that the study meets ethical guidelines and that the research participants will not be harmed in any way (Butin, 2010; Seidman, 2006). The process of gaining approval required that an IRB application be submitted to Northeastern University after an oral defense of my research proposal before the process of collecting data can begin.

After the IRB granted consent to conduct the study, the process of identifying participants for the study began. Once identified, an informed consent “free of jargon” form was provided to each participant who was identified to participate in the study to review the risks and sign before participating in the interview process (Seidman, 2006). The interviewer will go over the form outlining its key points and have participants to sign it before the interview begins. The informed
consent will covered seven parts suggested by Seidman (2006): 1) the invitation to participant, 2) potential risks, 3) the participants’ rights, 4) possible benefits, 5) confidentiality, 6) how the research will be disseminated, and 7) contact information and copies of the form (pp. 62-63). The consent form will be retained by the researcher and filed in a locked drawer with other documents pertaining to the study.

Only the identified researchers had access to the sources of data. Each participant was assured confidentiality and nondisclosure of their participation in the study. All data was handled in a confidential manner. Pseudonyms were used for all interview participants and the institutions where were employed at the time of the study. The researchers did not disclose participation or non-participation in the study, except as required by law. Because of the nature of web-based questionnaires, it is possible that respondents could be identified by the Internet Protocol (IP) address or other electronic records associated with their response. For this reason, IP information was not be entered into the research record.

Steps were taken to code the data (e.g., transcripts, digital recording, etc.) so no one other than the researcher will recognize the participants (Seidman, 2006). No harm was anticipated to the participants, however due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, additional efforts were made to ensure that each participant was aware of the study’s purpose. However, if necessary, participants could request that certain parts, or even all of their interview material, be withheld from the study (Seidman, 2006).

As stated previously in the recruitment section, participation in the study was voluntary. Participants had multiple opportunities to withdraw their participation. In the screening survey, participants could choose not to participate by returning the survey and not including their contact information. Individuals who were interested in participating in the interview process
were asked to include their contact information. Further, participants agreed to participate, but
became uncomfortable with the process and wanted to discontinue their participation could
withdraw their participation at any time during the process.

There were no expected risks, financial or psychological, associated with participation in
this study. It was possible that participants could feel uncomfortable with sharing their
experiences related to screening applicants. Therefore, every effort was made to make each
participant comfortable during the interview process by assuring them the confidentiality of their
data and by allowing them to skip any question that makes them feel uncomfortable. Participants
were informed that they could withdraw their participant at any time up until the transcripts were
transcribed. No questions were asked of participants that would require them to disclose
confidential information related to hiring decisions or any outcomes made about a specific
candidate during a past or present job search.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ screening of applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional colleges and universities in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are hiring managers’ mental models for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

2. What is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

This study investigated the mental models of hiring managers and how they influenced the screening process. Mental models are the cognitive representation of individuals’ perceptions, beliefs, and opinions (Craik, 1943/1967; Chermack, 2003; Johnson-Laird, 2004). To understand how the screening process is influenced by mental models, this study investigated participants’ mental models and the process by which hiring managers used to screen applicants for entry-level positions.

This chapter begins with an introduction of each hiring manager who participated in this study, followed by a presentation of the findings for each research question. Each finding will be introduced with a definition, followed by supporting evidence that includes quotes, paraphrased quotes, and any other pertinent information that substantiated the findings. At the end of each section of findings is a section summary. Finally, chapter 4 will end with a conclusion summary,
which provides a synthesis of findings for research questions one and two, followed by a discussion of how screening processes are influenced by hiring managers’ mental models.

**Study Participants**

This section will provide the background characteristics of each participant in this study. In the first section are two tables to show a broad view of the seven participants in this study. The second section will introduce the background profiles of each participant. Table 3 presents an aggregated view of the participants. Included are participants’ position at the institution, the type of institution where they are employed, the location of the institution, their level of education, and their race/ethnicity.

**Table 3**

*Matrix of Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Demographics</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position at Institution</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice-President of Student Affairs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean of Students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Institution</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location of Institution</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Level of Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 is a participant level view of aggregate characteristics. Each participant was provided a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Due to the close network that exists amongst student affairs professionals, certain identifying characteristics about each participant were not included in the table. For example, participants’ race/ethnicity and location of institution were removed from Table 4 to avoid any of the participants’ identities or the institutions where they were employed during the study from being identified.
### Table 4

**Summary of Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Gender)</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Years in Student Affairs</th>
<th>School Offers Master's Degree Preparation Program in Student Affairs</th>
<th><em>Professional Affiliations</em></th>
<th>Source of Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corinne (F)</td>
<td>Dean of Students</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NASPA ACPA NODA</td>
<td>NASPA Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solange (F)</td>
<td>Dean of Students</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NASPA ACPA</td>
<td>NASPA Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candi (F)</td>
<td>Assistant Dean of Students</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NASPA NCCPA</td>
<td>NASPA Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William (M)</td>
<td>Vice President of Student Affairs</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NASPA ACPA</td>
<td>NASPA Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake (M)</td>
<td>Director of Student Activities</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>Less than 10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NACA AFA</td>
<td>Snowball Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan (M)</td>
<td>Director of Residence Life</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>ACUHO-I SEAHO</td>
<td>Snowball Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany (F)</td>
<td>Director of Student Life</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>Less than 10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None specified</td>
<td>Snowball Sample</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Professional Affiliations of Participants

ACUHO-I – Association of College and University Housing Officers International
ACPA – American College Personnel Association
AFA – Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors
NACA – National Association for Campus Activities
NASPA – National Association for Student Personnel Administrators
NCCPA – North Carolina College Personnel Association
NODA – Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education
SEAHO – Southeastern Association of Housing Officers

Each characteristic represented in Table 4 was included to obtain a range and variation of hiring managers. The purpose of selecting participants that encompassed a wide range of characteristics was to provide generalizability to the study, which was represented by a small
number of participants. The range of participants in this study were demonstrated by participants’ size of school, years of experience, enrollment at the institution where they were employed, and whether the campus had a master’s degree program in student affairs. Participants in this study were employed on campuses that ranged from 1,000 students up to 30,000 students. Their educational backgrounds were also varied. Three participants had terminal degrees, while four participants had master’s degrees. Participants also varied in their years of experience. The least experienced participants in this study had less than 10 years professional experience in student affairs in comparison to three participants who had over 25 years of experience. Only two out of seven participants were employed at institutions with graduate preparation programs in student affairs. Participants with access to graduate programs were important to include in the study because of their access to graduate students, who could potentially fill vacant positions and access to faculty who could serve as search committee members.

The next section will introduce the seven participants who participated in this study. Each section will provide a brief narrative of how they entered the student affairs profession, their educational background, and their professional experience in student affairs. Participants were assigned pseudonyms by the primary researcher and are listed in the order which their interviews were conducted.

**Participant 1: Corinne**

Corinne is a Dean of Students at a small, private school. Her position is the highest ranking student affairs professional on her campus. Corinne has spent her entire professional career working in student affairs. Corinne’s first involvement with student affairs began while she was an undergraduate student when she worked as a resident assistant while attending
Corinne first realized that she wanted a career in student affairs after attending a conference for residence life professionals on her campus. Immediately after completing her bachelor’s degree, Corinne pursued her master’s degree in student affairs. Corinne worked as a graduate assistant mentoring and advising minority students while pursuing her degree full-time. After graduate school, Corinne obtained her first position in student affairs working as a program coordinator advising students. After a few years, Corinne accepted a new position in student activities at neighboring institution. While there, she pursued her doctorate and worked her way up to her current position. In total, Corinne has 10 years of experience in student affairs and is involved in various Dean and professional student affairs organizations.

**Participant 2: Solange**

Solange is a Dean of Students at a small, private school. She is also the Chief Student Affairs Officer on her campus. Solange is considered a seasoned professional because has more than 25 years of experience in student affairs. She described herself as being very involved in extra-curricular activities as an undergraduate student, which included working as a resident assistant, orientation leader, and holding numerous leadership roles on campus. Instead of going immediately to graduate school after completing her bachelor’s degree, Solange was able to obtain an entry-level position in student affairs at a small, private college because of her extensive undergraduate experience. After two years, Solange left her position to pursue a master’s degree in student affairs full-time. While pursuing her master’s degree, Solange worked as a graduate assistant in Residence Life and Greek Life. After graduation, she was hired as a Greek Affairs Coordinator at a small, private school. Solange has worked primarily at smaller, private colleges throughout her professional career. Solange also earned a doctorate in educational research and policy with a specialization in higher education. To advance in student
affairs she has taken positions that have allowed her to expand her experience and background in student affairs. At the time of the study, Solange had been Dean of Students at the same institution for the past 10 years.

**Participant 3: Candi**

Candi is an Assistant Dean of Student Affairs at a large, public university within a College of Professional Studies that enrolls undergraduate and graduate students. Candi is also the first student affairs professional to be hired in her department. Candi’s experience in student affairs is very diverse. She has worked at small, private predominately white institutions and small, private historically black institutions. Additionally, she has experience working at the state level for a community college system in the Southeast. Candi has worked in both primary and post-secondary education. She accepted her first position in student affairs immediately after completing her master’s degree in counseling education in the admissions department at a small, private school. While in graduate school, Candi completed several practicum and internships in counseling, which included an elementary school guidance counselor position and a practicum with a support group for Alcoholics Anonymous. Since Candi’s first position in student affairs, she has only worked in higher education. She gained increasingly more experience in student affairs while working a variety of different higher education institutions, which helped her to obtain her current position at a large, research university. Candi has more than ten years of experience in student affairs and is involved in various professional organizations related to student affairs.

**Participant 4: William**

William is Vice-President of Student Affairs at a small, public university where he serves as Chief Student Affairs Officer. William is well-respected in the profession because of his more
than 40 years of professional in student affairs. He is active in numerous professional student affairs organizations where he has held several leadership positions. William entered student affairs profession at a time when the profession was starting to evolve on college campuses. William did not plan to go into student affairs until after he went to graduate school. William received a scholarship to go to graduate school to pursue another field. During his second year of graduate school he accepted a resident assistant position in Residence Life. From that experience, William changed his major to pursue a master’s degree in student affairs. After completing his master’s degree, William accepted an entry-level position in Residence Life at a small, private college. After working two years in student affairs, William was invited to return to his graduate school to pursue his doctorate in higher education. While there, he studied under a leading scholar in the student affairs profession. Upon completing his doctorate, William accepted a dean position, which he held for a couple of years. From there, he accepted his current position, a role he has served in for more than 20 years.

**Participant 5: Jake**

Jake is the Director of Student Activities at a medium-sized, private university. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the same large, private university. Jake doesn’t have a lot of experience in student affairs. He has only worked at one institution. Jake got his start in student affairs while an undergraduate student. He described being active in student activities and participating on the college union programming board. Jake attended several conferences with the National Association for Campus Activities while an undergraduate student because of his involvement student activities. These experiences helped Jake decide to pursue a career in student affairs. Jake’s master’s degree is not in student affairs, it is in business administration. He admitted that his educational background is not the preferred path for someone in student
affairs. His preference is for a master’s degree in student affairs. Jake worked as a graduate assistant in student affairs while pursuing his master’s degree, where he co-advised the campus programming board and supervised the on-campus pub. After Jake completed his master’s degree, he accepted entry-level position in student activities. Jake has remained at the same institution for his entire career, but is in a higher level position, which has been less than 10 years.

Participant 6: Alan

Alan is the Director of Residence Life at a large, state university. Even though Alan does not have senior level position, such as a Dean or Vice President, he is still he is given much respect on his campus and in the student affairs profession because he has more than 30 years of experience. Alan was an undergraduate student in the mid-1970s when student affairs was still emerging as a profession. Many of the titles for positions that existed where he lived as an undergraduate student in the residence halls no longer exist. He remembered having dorm mothers who lived on campus to help monitor students as being a part of the staff. While Alan pursued his bachelor’s degree he worked as a fire marshal, was responsible for filling drink machines, and was president of his hall council. It was the Director of Residence Life on his campus that suggested that he consider a career in student affairs. Alan graduated and worked for a year before returning to school to pursue a master’s degree in student affairs. While pursuing his master’s degree, Alan had a graduate assistantship in the Residence Life Department. After graduation, Alan accepted a live-in entry-level hall director position in residence life. Each position he has accepted since then has been in residence life. Alan has worked at small schools, large schools, private and public institutions. Early in his career Alan chose to pursue a doctorate in higher education while continuing to work in residence life. Alan
has been in his current position for over five years and has maintained membership in residence life related professional organizations for his entire student affairs career. Most of his closest friends are student affairs professionals he has met through involvement in professional organizations.

**Participant 7: Bethany**

Bethany is the Director of Student Life at a medium-sized, public university. Bethany has only worked at one institution during her student affairs career. She worked in corporate America for two years after she graduated from college before she decided to return to school to pursue a career in student affairs. While Bethany was an undergraduate student, she was involved in extra-curricular activities like student orientation, mentoring and leadership programs. Bethany pursued a master’s degree in college counseling and student affairs and worked as a graduate assistant in student activities to gain experience. Her position involved advising student clubs and organizations, which prepared her for her first professional position in student affairs. Bethany accepted a position in student activities at her current institution. She is still working in that role, but her responsibilities have grown with the institution. Now she is responsible for supervising newly created positions in her department.

**Findings**

This section will discuss the findings for this study. Table 5 is a visual representation that summarizes the findings for each research question. It will be followed by two sections, Findings for Research Question #1 and Findings for Research Question #2, which discuss the individual themes and provides the evidence that supports the findings for each research question.
Table 5

Summary of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH QUESTION 1:</th>
<th>What are hiring managers’ mental models for entry-level positions in college student affairs?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Educational Backgrounds are Most Credible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practical Application of Required Knowledge</td>
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<td>Personality Aligns With Job Expectations</td>
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<td>Ability to Adapt to Campus Environment</td>
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<td>Career Continuity</td>
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<th>RESEARCH QUESTION 2:</th>
<th>What is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PHASE 1: Construction of Job Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>PHASE 2: Activation of Student Affairs Network</td>
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<td>PHASE 3: Filtering Applicants for Preferred Qualifications</td>
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<td>PHASE 4: Assessment of Candidates’ Fit</td>
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<td>PHASE 5: Synthesis to Recommend Finalists</td>
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**Hiring Managers’ Mental Models**

This section discovered the preferences participants had towards entry-level applicants in student affairs. The following thematic sections will illustrate the common themes and patterns found amongst participants in this study. Each finding will be presented as common mental models found amongst participants and not each participant’s individual mental models. Five themes were identified to answer the research question: What are hiring managers’ mental models for screening applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs? The findings were: 1) Traditional Educational Backgrounds are Most Credible; 2) Practical Application of
Required Knowledge; 3) Personality Aligns with Job Expectations; 4) Ability to Adapt to Campus Environment; and 5) Career Continuity. Hiring managers’ mental models were interpreted from participant interview transcripts and other data that was gathered to investigate the first research question. Each theme is conceptually distinct from one another and represents the common preference and biases found amongst participants’ mental models.

**Traditional Educational Backgrounds are Most Credible**

The first theme of hiring managers’ mental models is Traditional Educational Backgrounds are Most Credible. Traditional Educational Backgrounds are Most Credible is defined as academic degrees from not-for-profit colleges and universities are more trustworthy because the quality of learning is perceived to be better than non-traditional schools. Participants in this study preferred traditional educational backgrounds because there is a level of integrity and respect that is associated with applicant’s who attend classes taught by faculty in a classroom on a college campus. Participants believe that applicants with degrees from traditional schools are more respected their peers, faculty members and administrators where they are employed. The findings evidenced participants’ preference that applicants with traditional backgrounds are more qualified for positions in student affairs.

Some participants’ preferences were so strong for traditional schools that they characterized themselves as biased. Both William and Solange described themselves as biased towards traditional schools. Solange explained that traditional schools as having an “institutional history and foundation” that gives them credibility. She stated that traditional schools are “the tried and true path to getting an academic background” in student affairs. William, who has been in student affairs more than 40 years, believed that students who attend traditional schools are better prepared for entry-level positions in student affairs. In his opinion, non-traditional schools
“do not give its students an opportunity to have the same type of intellectual discourse as traditional schools.” William, who openly questioned the credibility of online schools during the interview stated, “Applicants with traditional backgrounds have the benefit of seeing first-hand what they are learning in the classroom [and] they are being taught in a classroom by faculty who can challenge their thinking.”

Alan believed that traditional schools provide a sense of “collegiality” that can’t be obtained by online schools. Alan’s preference is for applicants to have gone to classes face-to-face with other students on a physical campus. He explained how he has hired applicants who have not been a part of a cohort and notices a difference in their ability to work together as a team. William is in agreement that applicants learn better when they are in the classroom. William explained that he preferred traditional schools because their students are “being exposed to world class professors [with the] opportunity to interact with them in a meaningful way.” William reminisced during his interview about being able to sit with faculty over lunch and have stimulating conversation about his academic pursuits. Alan, who works on a campus with a graduate program in student affairs, has seen first-hand the benefits of students attending a traditional school. He stated, “I feel much more confident of people that have gone to or take legitimate programs where they’re actually taking classes with peers and with faculty that are from a particular campus.” When Alan was asked to explain the term “legitimate campus,” he indicated that his preference was for traditional schools where students took their classes on a physical college campus.

Participants in this study preferred traditional schools because there was a sense a familiarity with the institutions applicants attended. All of the participants in this study attended traditional schools. For Alan, William, and Solange, traditional schools are what they know and
value because they obtained their bachelor’s and master’s degrees when computers were not prevalent in higher education. Even Corinne, who works closely with the graduate students on her campus in the student affairs program, values having a sense of familiarity with schools applicants attend. During our interview she asserted where applicants go to school matters. Corinne described her preference is for familiar schools that “have a name.” One of Alan’s biggest requirements is that applicants must have “come from a reputable program.” Participants in this study associated reputable programs with traditional schools because of the familiarity they have knowing something about a school, its history, and quality of the graduates they produce. Alan explained that students must come from a solid master’s degree program if they want to obtain a position in student affairs.

Corinne has observed that schools that hiring managers recognize by name help them to know more about the applicant and the type of education they received. She added, “You feel like you know the quality of what you should get, as far as the knowledge the candidate will have.” For example, when William was asked what type of educational backgrounds he preferred he asserted, “I can tell you the best producers come from Virginia Tech [and] come from UGA [University of Georgia].” Several participants in this study felt comfortable expressing their preferences for specific schools that they know and respect. For example, William, Alan, Solange, and Corinne each shared the names of schools they respected and/or had members of their staff to graduate from. These schools are listed in Table 6. Candi, Jake, and Bethany, did not provide any names of specific schools, however, they each expressed a preference for applicants possessing the appropriate educational background to work student affairs.

Table 6 is a summary of schools participants indicated in their interview that they preferred and/or had represented currently within their student affairs division. All of the
preferred schools mentioned during participant interviews were public and private, not-for-profit colleges and universities. The names of each school are listed in alphabetical order.

**Table 6**

*Summary of Participants’ Preferred Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Preferred Schools (listed alphabetically) <em>mentioned 2 times</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>Appalachian State University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bowling Green State University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carson-Newman University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida State University*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa State University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miami University (of Ohio)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Carolina State University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radford University</td>
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<td>University of Central Florida</td>
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<td>University of Florida</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Georgia</td>
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<td>University of Nebraska</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of North Carolina – Greensboro</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of North Carolina – Wilmington</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of South Carolina*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virginia Polytechnic and State University</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In addition to participants’ preferences for traditional schools, some participants expressed strong bias against proprietary schools. William and Solange were the most vocal during their interviews about their concerns about whether or not proprietary schools were acceptable in student affairs as an appropriate education background. Both Solange and William talked about proprietary schools without being asked during their interview and revealed how they believed they lacked credibility. Participants attributed academic credibility as a huge reason why they preferred traditional education backgrounds. William stated that he did not believe proprietary schools would ever reach the same level of credibility as traditional schools.
In his opinion, they would never “match the prestige of a Harvard or M.I.T. [Massachusetts Institute of Technology].” Corinne admitted that she believes that in higher education there is “still some kind of arrogance” amongst faculty and other administrators who believe that attending traditional schools are the only way to obtain a quality education. As an example, Corinne recalled a time when she conducted a search committee for a position in student affairs and a faculty member stated, "I just toss those [from proprietary schools] out immediately.”

Participants in this study questioned the quality of applicants’ education background from proprietary schools because they do all of their classes online. Solange asserted, “It’s going to be a long time before the academy will accept online degree programs as viable or comparable to the traditional experience.” In the same interview, Solange admitted that in the near future she would be taking a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) at Duke University, a private not-for-profit school, later this year. MOOCs are free, online classes that are a new phenomenon in higher education. When Solange was asked to speak further about her criticism of online schools and her desire to take an online course, she stated that the schools she was referring to were proprietary schools. She added that online programs at schools like Duke “have all the credibility in the world.” William indicated similar concerns based on his past experiences he shared about the lack of quality applicants from proprietary schools on his campus. Alan, who described himself as biased, added, “I don’t think they’re [proprietary school graduates] well-rounded as people…working on a campus, doing the job, and taking classes with your peers.”

Solange followed up by saying that choosing to hire someone in student affairs at her institution without a traditional school background would be frowned upon because faculty do not consider proprietary schools to be serious degrees. On the other hand, Jake seemed to know very little about proprietary schools to answer many questions. He stated, “I’ve never worked at
a for-profit school and so I have little knowledge of really what their dynamics are.” I observed Jake’s discomfort with my follow-up question when I asked him to tell me what his perceptions were about proprietary schools. He added, “I wouldn’t be able to answer that. I do know a couple of schools I believe that they are for-profit around this general area, but that’s the extent of it.” When Jake responded to questions about his educational preferences he used the phrases “have they been through higher ed courses,” “master’s degree in higher ed,” and “somebody who has been through a higher ed program” to describe his preferences for applicants’ education background. Jake was the only participant who did not have a clear preference toward traditional schools or proprietary schools.

Other participants in this study expressed that they would be more to applicants who attended proprietary schools, but because they felt pressure from faculty or other administrators on their campuses, they showed preferences toward applicants from traditional schools. I observed Corinne’s nervousness as she spoke about the culture against proprietary schools that existed on her campus. Corinne indicated that she was less critical towards proprietary schools because of her personal experiences taking online classes for her doctoral program. However, all of her staff she listed during her interview graduated from traditional schools. Bethany indicated that she also works on a college campus that is very anti-proprietary school and “elitist” towards applicants who do not have a traditional education background. Bethany stated that she doesn’t care where an applicant’s degree comes from, however her supervisor is against any applicant that was not educated from a traditional school. Bethany expounded by saying that while she is open to applicants from proprietary schools, her supervisor would only support her hiring an applicant who had earned their credentials from a known traditional school. She stated, “If you don’t have that traditional higher education experience, he’s not going to pay any attention to
you.” She later added, “I think it helps round out your experience if it’s in person, but more and more people don’t have the luxury to go into a master’s program where you are able to let go of your daily job.”

**Practical Application of Preferred Knowledge**

The second theme of hiring managers’ mental models is Practical Application of Preferred Knowledge. Practical Application of Preferred Knowledge is defined as applicants’ ability to demonstrate evidence of essential job functions required for a position. Participants in this study valued applicants who possessed transferrable experience through previous academic and/or employment experiences. A pattern emerged amongst participants that indicated hiring managers preferred applicants who have obtained hands-on experience through paid and/or unpaid positions. Participants demonstrated that applicants who followed similar career paths to their own were preferred. Participants valued applicants who obtained the necessary skills and knowledge to work in student affairs through paid and/or unpaid work experiences. The findings evidenced participants preferred applicants who gained experience through graduate assistantships and/or practicums, co-curricular experiences, and related job experiences.

All of the participants, except for Candi, had obtained hand-on experience in student affairs while in graduate school. Candi, however, did indicate she completed a practicum and internship while pursuing her master’s degree in counseling. Some participants, such as Solange, Jake, Alan, and Corinne, also obtained experience as undergraduate students. For example, Solange worked as an orientation leader and held various student leadership positions, Corinne worked as a resident assistant, Jake worked in student activities, and Alan worked in residence life doing various jobs. Corinne summed up what the value of having direct experience by stating, “…if you never lived in a residence hall or you’ve never performed a duty on-call then
that would be overwhelming. Not saying you can’t do it, but I want to know somebody knows what they are getting into.”

Alan knows first-hand the value of having applicants who know how to do the job. Working in residence life requires Alan to make sure that applicants can relate to the position. Applicants must be able to demonstrate they understand what it means to work in an environment where they also must live. To expound on his preference for applicants who have a background in residence life, Alan stated that applicants must demonstrate “they’ve run a hall of 250/300 people and have supervised RA’s.” Jake added, “At the end of the day what I look for…is experience.” For Jake, having experience goes hand in hand with going to graduate school. In his opinion, you cannot do one without the other. He expounded further by stating, “I’ve had some candidates that have had higher ed backgrounds but no experience [and] haven’t even done any internships or practicums.” Jake explained that applicants cannot expect to get a job in student affairs without having applied the knowledge they have learned to real life situations.

Several participants referenced graduate assistantships as a critical factor in whether an applicant is able to get a job in student affairs. Alan explained that anyone that applied for a position in his residence life department would find it extremely difficult to get a job if they have never worked as a graduate assistant in a residence hall. Alan added, "Primarily I’m looking for somebody that’s done jobs similar to this previously, so they really do know what they are getting involved with.” Similarly, Bethany needs that same type of knowledge about how to do their job. She stated,

What we need is somebody who is experienced and well-versed in student affairs. The orientation stuff, the cheerleading, the mentorship, the involvement, and the
organizational skills I learned from being involved in extracurricular life out of college…That I think is invaluable.”

Bethany explained that having experience doing the job is absolutely necessary if an applicant wants to get hired in student affairs.

Several participants attributed the experiences gained through graduate assistantships and practicums towards helping them get their first entry-level position in student affairs. Corinne, Candi, William, Jake, Alan and Bethany each worked two years as graduate assistants pursuing their master’s degree full-time before accepting employment in student affairs. Solange was the only participant to obtain her first full-time position in student affairs with her bachelor’s degree. During her interview she attributed her ability to obtain that position because of her extensive involvement in co-curricular activities while an undergraduate student. Jake worked two years as graduate assistant in student activities and was a supervisor of the campus pub before he graduated with his master’s degree. With his two years of experience in student activities, plus his undergraduate experience working on the campus activities board, Jake was able to get hired in student activities immediately following graduation. Alan worked as a hall director for two years while in graduate school and used his experiences to qualify for his first full-time professional position right after he graduated with his master’s degree. Finally, Corinne’s graduate assistantship involved advising students of color. She explained how she was able to get a job advising young women through a women’s center when she accepted a program coordinator position at a large university. Each of these examples demonstrates the significance of graduate assistantships providing the type of skills and experiences necessary for employment in student affairs.
Graduate assistantships and practicums are valuable because they provide graduate students the opportunity to work hands-on with students. Graduate students are considered para-professionals who work alongside full-time student affairs professionals who supervise them as they coordinate and program student services. Graduate assistantships teach students about the functional area in student affairs where they are working. Candi talked about the benefits that working on campus provide for applicants who are trying to gain experience. Candi admitted that she can’t afford to have applicants who do not understand how to do their job. She said that she is not a micro-manager and she does not have time to train someone. She stated, “Our office is very busy and I don’t have time to kind of micro-manage anybody. I need someone to come in and understand what their role is and get to it.” She stated that applicants need to know how to do the job and that this knowledge only comes from having had done something similar while they were in college.

Participants indicated the type of position applicants seek often influences the type of experiences applicants must possess. Participants initially screen for direct experiences through graduate assistantships, but also indicated they are open to experiences outside of student affairs, if applicants can demonstrate they have transferrable skills. Corinne’s said that her preference is for applicants to be inclusive, which can be evidenced through direct experience in student affairs or through “transferrable skills.” Similarly, Candi said that she can go with “equivalent work experience depending on what their career path has been.”

Participants indicated that practical knowledge can be obtained through specific experiences or skills learned through previous employment. For instance, Alan prefers applicants that know how to create a healthy living environment, whereas William prefers applicants who have “an understanding of diversity appreciation.” Candi described how
sometimes it is hard to find applicants for positions in her department because positions must work with students who are enrolled in a small college within the university. She indicated that many applicants have backgrounds that are not in student affairs, but bring value to the position if they have transferrable skills. For instance, one of the positions she recently filled at the time of her interview had the responsibility of working with minority students. Therefore, Candi indicated the transferrable experiences she needed included experience with pipeline programs. Her preference included “somebody who understood them, somebody who could explain them to faculty and staff, and somebody who had a good network with pipeline programs.” The competencies she described are not necessarily obtainable through a traditional student affairs experience. Participants indicated that as long as applicants can demonstrate they can do the job, they would meet their preferences.

**Personality Aligns with Job Expectations**

The third theme of hiring managers’ mental models is Personality Aligns with Job Expectations. Personality Aligns with Job Expectations is defined as applicants’ demonstration of behaviors that match the temperament needed for a position. Participants in this study indicated a preference for applicants whose attitudes exemplified the disposition required to work in student affairs. Participants’ indicated preferences for applicants who were mature, enthusiastic about the student affairs profession, and comfortable doing tasks beyond the scope of their job description. This section will include participants’ some common mental models for preferred personalities of applicants expressed in this study. Participants evidenced a preference for applicants who exhibit flexibility, are passionate, and make good decisions.

Participants in this study indicated that flexibility is a preferred personality for applicants in student affairs. Flexibility is preferred in applicants’ attitudes as well as their behavior.
According to Jake and Corinne, applicants demonstrate flexibility by showing their “ability to wear many different hats.” Participants also described flexibility as being willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. During her interview, Bethany stated that applicants must “be willing to roll up their sleeves and do everything.” On her particular campus, the student affairs staff is not very large and applicants must be “willing to do everything.” According to Bethany, “You have to be able to fax things. You have to be able to move tables.” Jake defined flexibility as an applicants’ ability to multi-task. Applicants must feel comfortable doing multiple tasks at one time. As an example, Jake indicated that applicants should be able to work “advising students” on one day, and on the next day, be “in the office and doing data assessment.”

Participants also referenced flexibility in applicants’ ability to demonstrate their level of comfort with doing tasks outside of their regular job duties. In particular, Corinne and Bethany talked about the expectations placed on student affairs staff at small institutions. They each described situations where entry-level professionals must spend long hours outside of their regular work day to do a job. Corinne, Bethany, and Jake indicated that applicants must be “willing to work nights and weekends” as part of their responsibilities because in college student affairs “typical office hours are not 8 to 5” in student affairs. Corinne, who works at a campus with 1,000 students, stated that working on the weekends is necessary to help build a sense of community on campus. Applicants must be willing to “go to a basketball game, even if you don’t like basketball” or “go to a theater or musical performance” to demonstrate flexibility. Similarly, Bethany indicated that applicants must be willing to work events evenings and weekends. Bethany explained that her campus needs applicants to comfortable with rolling up their sleeves and working. She added, “[They must] come in here and pound the pavement because there’s not anyone else that does it.”
Next, participants in this study indicated that passion is a preferred personality for working in student affairs. Passion is defined as applicants’ ability to a high level of energy in their attitude as well as their purpose for pursuing a student affairs career. Solange explained that applicants must be motivated and demonstrate that they believe that working in college student affairs means more than just fun. She added, “I think their motivation has to be much deeper. I’ll be interested in their story and try to discern where they have passion.” Participants described a preference for applicants who demonstrate sincere interest in college student affairs because many entry-level positions in student affair involve working with students who are 18 to 24-years-old. Candi stated, “My ideal image would be someone that is enthusiastic…someone who has a lot of energy.” Jake added, “I am looking for someone who is excited, first and foremost…excited to be in student affairs.” Participants valued applicants who displayed an energetic attitude. William added, “The worst thing you can say if you come in here for an interview with me and say….I love working with students.” William described how applicants must demonstrate an inner quality that is grounded more in just wanting to working with students. He stated that he prefers for applicants who demonstrate passion in their expression of their attitude towards student affairs.

Jake explained that he is also prefers applicants who are “excited to be in student affairs.” Several participants associated excitement and enthusiasm as key indicators for passion an applicant should possess toward college student affairs. Jake defined enthusiastic applicants as “someone who wants to come in, take the bull by the horns, and run with programs, run with initiatives, run with services.” Alan described how he can detect applicants’ passion for the student affairs profession by reviewing their application materials. He indicated that sometimes applicants’ application materials do not exhibit any passion. He added, “It doesn’t show
enthusiasm…it doesn’t expose what they believe or feel.” Alan explained how he valued applicants’ ability to convey their passion for a career in college student affairs. In the same way, Bethany described during her interview how applicants must demonstrate a true desire work in college student affairs. She stated that applicants should write a targeted cover letter and resume’ to express their passion for a particular job. Because her campus is located near a large retirement community, Bethany indicated she often receives numerous applications from people who were not serious about a career in student affairs. She asserted, “To some extent you have to really want to do the job because you’re not getting paid big bucks for doing it. You really have to have a passion for it.” Bethany stated that her preference if for applicants who truly want to work in student affairs and not because they just need a job.

Finally, participants indicated that good decision-making is a preferred personality for working in student affairs. Participants described the importance of applicants’ ability to demonstrate maturity when making ethically sound decisions. Solange stated that she has no tolerance for applicants who do not know how to handle themselves on social media. Solange admitted that she conducts a mandatory check of any applicant’s social media accounts by conducting a Google© search. She noted,

We don’t want to hire somebody who has poor judgment. If you’re living in a building with students we want to know how do you represent yourself, what kind of judgment do you make about interacting with people. Are you posting [on social media] you’re at a bar and doing 21 shots for your birthday? Applicants who use social media inappropriately by taking and positing pictures that are not a good representation of themselves demonstrate their sense of judgment may not be sound enough
to make good decisions if hired for a position. Good decision-making demonstrates applicants’ maturity, another quality associated with applicants’ ability to make good decisions.

Entry-level applicants who want to work in student affairs are often surrounded by temptations that require them to demonstrate good decisions. Alan works in residence life on a college campus that has a large Greek life population. He indicated that he knows first-hand about types of difficult situations that exist amongst student affairs professionals who live in the residence halls. He stated, “Everybody wants to have fun in Greek Life. The issue is how do you follow the rules and nobody gets in trouble…” Alan described how Greek life on his campus often involves his staff having to address issues with alcohol. Therefore, Alan said that he values applicants who can demonstrate that they are “more responsible” and know how to make good decisions. Candi, who works in a professional school with graduate and undergraduate students, prefers applicants who can handle working in an environment that can be high pressure. She said, “[Applicants should] not be easily flustered or frustrated.” Candi indicated that she works in an environment that requires its staff to be mindful of the rankings of the college. Therefore, applicants must be able to handle stressful situations. Candi values applicants who know how to deal with crisis management because it demonstrates their ability to handle themselves when a crisis occurs.

Ability to Adapt to Campus Environment

The fourth theme of hiring managers’ mental models is Ability to Adapt to Campus Environment. Ability to Adapt to Campus Environment is defined as applicant’s ability to acclimate themselves to the culture of the institution they are seeking employment. Culture is defined as the values, beliefs or practices that exist within a college or university. Hiring managers in this study preferred applicants who can scan an institution’s culture and acclimate
themselves comfortably to the behaviors and practices that exist. Participants value applicants who have the ability to “fit” into the campus environment. Participants evidenced applicants who are unable to make the successful transition to a new campus environment because they lack familiarity with the culture of the institution.

Participants in this study each had their own interpretations of what it meant for an applicant to have an ability to adapt to a campus environment. While describing their mental model for preferred applicants, some participants referenced the word fit, while other participants talked about applicants’ ability to acclimate themselves to the campus culture. Other participants also referenced the word “culture” or used the word “campus culture” when describing adaptability to a campus environment. For example, Solange described fit by stating, “I think a good fit is someone who has the background experience and then to potential for adaptability for whatever the campus culture is.” Whereas William described fit as having “the intellectual and professional capabilities to do a wonderful job.” Participants like Bethany see value in applicants who not only meet the qualifications for a position, be also able to adjust to working in an environment that may require them to change how they do business. Bethany, who is building a Greek life program, needs applicants who understand the scope and mission of the institution. She added, “If you don’t have that applicable knowledge, it may not be much of a fit. I need someone who can get that and who understands what that means.”

Solange remembered one applicant who was hired that could not make the adjustment to working at a small, private college. Solange laughed as recalled a woman she had hired for a director position who could not make the leap from attending a large university to a small school setting. She remembered the woman she hired graduated from a student affairs program at a large university, which she described as a well-known and respected. According to Solange, the
woman was excellent on paper and met all the requirements for the position. However, when she
got to campus, the woman struggled with adjusting to being director in a one-person office.
Solange explained, “She almost had a nervous breakdown. She was truly over her head and had
no idea how to work on her own.” Alan also described the trouble he had with applicants who
struggled with adjusting to his campus. In his example, he shared how he had hired a staff
member who worked previously at a Big 10 School, which is a division of the National
Collegiate Athletic Association, who never seemed to adapt to the school. Alan explained that
she was unable to connect with colleagues in the department because they did not “talk about
football and tailgating all the time.” Alan explained that sometimes applicants have issues with
fitting in with the staff because they have made assumptions about the campus culture. Alan
described his school as “family oriented”, whereas applicants see the school as more oriented
towards sports. According to Alan, that is not the case. He expounded by saying, “If you are an
ACC [Atlantic Coast Conference] school or a Big 10 school, it could be challenging to come
here.”

Corinne explained that because she works at a small school, some applicants assume that
the work will be easy. She described her preference for applicants who are open to new ideas.
Corinne explained that some applicants who have been hired in the past come to campus eager to
implement new ideas from their previous school. Corinne stated that applicants who are closed-
mined to new ideas do not fit well at her school. She indicated that she prefers individuals who
are “learners.” In her opinion, learners should try to acclimate themselves the campus culture
before changing thing up. Corinne added, “Learn what the culture is before making those
changes. They [applicants] need to learn from what we’ve done.”
Jake and Bethany indicated their desire to have applicants respect and follow the values and/or traditions that exist on campus. For example, Jake described his campus culture as a “multi-campus” system where “decisions are not always made at one campus.” Jake’s school is one of several campuses his institution has across the United States. Jake’s described his institution as one that is data-driven institution and values assessment as part of its culture. Therefore, he added there is a preference to have applicants who are comfortable in that type of environment. Thus, applicants need to be “somebody’s who’s comfortable speaking that language.” On the other hand, Candi has worked at numerous types of higher education institutions and has experienced multiple types of campus cultures. She stated, “I’ve worked at predominantly white institutions and the culture is all different depending on the institution. It’s a different feeling depending on where you are.” Candi described vividly past situations where individuals were hired for positions who didn’t understand how to fit in where they were hired. She expounded further by saying,

When I was at the community college system I didn’t feel like people [could] understand what student development was… their backgrounds were so different which made a lot of sense [as to] why they didn’t seem to be connected or understand student development. Candi explained that applicants must be able to know the environment they are walking into so they can perform their job. In particular, Candi indicated that she needs applicants to understand how to navigate working in a professional school that has been awarded a national ranking for the programs it provides. Finally, Alan described how his staff will sometimes knock on doors to check on students to build a sense of community. He added, “If you feel like that’s invading people’s space then this is not the place for you.” Alan explained how past hires have not adjusted well because “we touch people [with hugs] a lot. If you feel like that’s invading
peoples’ space then this is not the place for you.” He ended by stating, “I think the fit here is about when someone gets in trouble, we almost always give them a second chance.”

**Career Continuity**

The fifth theme of hiring managers’ mental models is Career Continuity. Career Continuity is defined as applicants’ ability to demonstrate an occupational trajectory that follows a logical progression of work-related experiences that are in student affairs. Participants preferred applicants that have followed a career path that demonstrates consistent involvement in the student affairs profession. Participants value applicants who have committed themselves to pursuing the student affairs profession early in their career by seeking academic, co-curricular, and work-related experiences to prepare them for the field. Participants evidenced applicants with work experiences unrelated to student affairs, and possessing large gaps of time between completion of their bachelor and masters’ degrees, as examples of applicants’ inability to demonstrate a connection to the student affairs profession.

After evaluating all participants’ interview transcripts, I observed they each had similar career trajectories. Transcripts revealed that participants in this study made conscious decisions to pursue a career in student affairs and had backgrounds that showed extensive involvement in student affairs at the beginning of their career. Participants referenced significant undergraduate involvement in co-curricular activities, associated with student affairs, or being mentored into the profession as the motivation for their pursuit to become a student affairs professional. Corinne, Jake, and William each pursued a master’s degree in student affairs immediately after completing their bachelor’s degree. All three attributed their decision to pursue a career in student affairs to their undergraduate experiences. Alan and Candi worked one year after graduating with the bachelor’s degree and Bethany worked for two years after graduating with
Solange, who worked for two years in student affairs with just a bachelor’s degree, stated, “I’m sure I got that job because I had been really involved in campus life.” Solange admitted that after two years working in working full-time in student affairs, she decided that she wanted to pursue the field long-term, and enrolled in a master’s degree program in student affairs. Since Solange’s first job in student affairs, she has never worked outside of the profession.

Corinne and Jake attributed their decision to work in student affairs to their involvement in co-curricular activities while undergraduate students. Both of them followed a continuous career path in student affairs that went from undergraduate school, to graduate school, and straight into the student affairs profession. Corinne defined herself as having a “traditional” career path because all of her school-related experiences and past employment have been centered on college student affairs. Corinne stated, “Like many people I didn’t realize I could turn this into a career during my junior year in college during an RA [resident assistant] conference held on campus.” She added, “Once I found out…I got my master’s in college student personnel.” Jake described his career path similar to Corinne’s. Jake has only had a career in student affairs. He stated that his connection to student affairs began as an undergraduate student while volunteering with the student activities department. He attributed his decision to pursue student affairs to his experiences working with student affairs professionals and attending the National Association for Campus Activities conferences. As a result of Jake attending those conferences, he stated that he “really started to find [his] love in working with students.” He added, “It got me connected to other [student affairs] professional [and] seeing what they experienced got me excited about what I could potentially do.”
Having career continuity is about applicants demonstrating that they have a connection to the students that they will serve. Participants prefer applicants with backgrounds that demonstrate they that student affairs is the only career interest. Applicants who have waited later in life to go back to school to pursue a master’s degree in student affairs or have held a job(s) unrelated to student affairs do not exhibit a logical progression of experiences related to student affairs. Jake and Candi each shared their disapproval of gaps in applicants’ employment background and provided an example. Jake stated,

If someone finished undergrad and then worked outside of the field five, ten years [and] later started their higher ed degree…I don’t know if that’s the career path I’m looking for. I really look for candidates that have a minimal gap between and undergraduate and grad…

Jake added, “Those type of applicants have no connection to the students they serve.” Jake suggested that applicants who have been out of school for a while cannot relate to the students they would serve on his campus. Candi agreed with Jakes sentiment. She stated, “I do look at gaps in employment. I look at where a person started and how they got to where they are now.” Candi explained that applicants’ lack of consistent employment may be an indication that an applicant may not be able to relate to the position.

Out of Alan’s 30 years of experience working in student affairs he stated that he has learned that applicants with work experience outside of student affairs typically do not work out. Solange agreed. She stated that teachers, caterers, and coaches who apply for positions in student affairs have not shown through their background that this is what they want to do. Alan explained that he preferred applicants have shown a background of varying experiences in student affairs. Alan added, “This is a logical step as opposed to a big jump.” Alan explained
how some applicants believe they can go from working retail to working in student affairs. He added, “They’ve been working for a Best Buy for the last 10 years and they think they can be a hall director.” He explained, “This is where often we come into issues with people who come from outside student affairs who say, ‘I can do this job.’ They leave here in mid-semester going, ‘I didn’t know what I was not going to be [like this]….’” On the other hand, Bethany attributed most of her unqualified applicants to the fact that her school is located in an area that heavily populated with retirees. Bethany said that she struggles with applicants who apply for positions and do not know anything about student affairs. Bethany described how she sometimes gets frustrated with living in a retirement area because it is hard to attract the right type of applicants. She added, “We have seen several people come in here and want to ride out their career here.”

**Section Summary**

This section described five themes that answered the research question: What are hiring managers’ mental models when screening applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs? Those themes were: 1) Traditional Educational Backgrounds are Most Credible; 2) Practical Application of Required Knowledge; 3) Personality Aligns with Job Expectations; 4) Ability to Adapt to Campus Environment; and 5) Career Continuity. Each theme in this section introduced the common mental models which participants in this study shared with one another.

Mental models are a complex concept to understand. It should be noted that each participant in this study demonstrated elements of each mental model discussed in this section. However, participants’ mental models for preferred applicants are not exactly alike. Participants’ mental models should be seen as individualized cognitive images that work across a spectrum of preferences, depending on hiring managers’ background, experiences, and environment. Participants have an ability to create their own mental models and choose how they will be
placed in priority order based on their preferences. For example, the findings revealed that participants prefer applicants with a traditional educational background. That means participants, overall, had a preference for applicants from traditional schools. However, that does not mean that traditional school backgrounds were the number one preference for each participant. Participants may place more value on career continuity; thus, choosing to not scrutinize applicants’ education backgrounds as much as another mental model. Therefore, Candi, who works in a specialized area within student affairs, may choose to favor applicants who demonstrate a career trajectory in student affairs as opposed making where an applicant went to school a top priority.

Mental models should be viewed collectively and individually. Collectively, participants’ mental models work together with each other to create a combined mental image of a preferred applicant. Thus, mental models are interconnected in some way with each other. For instance, participants’ mental model for traditional education backgrounds have credibility is connected to the mental model application of required knowledge. They are connected because applicants who have attended traditional schools are likely to have held graduate assistantships. One does not occur without the other. However, mental models can also stand alone. At any given time, a hiring manager or any other individual, can harness one mental model, depending on the situation which they are in. Finally, because mental models are constructed independently with each individual, and are based on their own experiences and backgrounds, no two mental models will be exactly alike.

**Hiring Managers’ Screening Process**

This section discovered the screening process for entry-level positions in student affairs. The following thematic illustrate common themes found amongst participants in this study. Each
finding will be presented in phases which represent hiring managers’ screening process. Five phases were identified to answer the research question: What is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs? The findings were: 1) Construction of Job Description; 2) Activation of Student Affairs Network; 3) Filtering Applications for Preferred Qualifications; 4) Assessment of Candidates’ Fit; and 5) Synthesis to Recommend Finalists. Each section will introduce the phase and the patterns found amongst participants in this study. Each theme is conceptually distinct from one another and represents common practices and procedures for screening found amongst study participants. Select excerpts from participant interviews, along triangulated data collected from screening documents, will be included in each section to better demonstrate each theme.

**PHASE 1: Construction of Job Description**

The first phase of the screening process is Construction of Job Description. Construction of Job Description is defined as hiring managers’ development of a list of qualifications, characteristics, and key job functions of an open position. Hiring managers create job descriptions to reflect their preferences for preferred applicants (e.g., mental models) and those opinions of campus stakeholders on campus. Campus stakeholder is defined as administrators, human resources departments, faculty, student affairs professionals, and other individuals with a vested interest in the position. Participants must go through an approval process to build the preferred qualifications for a position. Job descriptions reflect the participants’ preferences as well as environmental influences that exist within a campus. Job descriptions assist hiring manages with identifying which applicants meet the preferred qualifications for a position and which applicants do not. Participants evidenced hiring managers’ process to build a job description and the campus stakeholders who have influence in the process.
The process of constructing a job description is the first step in the screening process is hiring managers employ to identifying preferred applicants. Some participants indicated they must go through an approval process before finalizing a job description, while others have more autonomy to make their own decisions. Alan stated he takes his proposal for an available position, which also includes the job description, “up the chain of command to get approval.” Alan stated that approval for the job description goes all the way up to the vice-chancellor. Although Candi gets to write and revise her own job description, she explained that she must obtain approval from her department’s human resources representative as well as the human resources department at the entire university. Finally, Corinne stated she starts the process of developing a job description by asking questions about the position. The questions she asks herself include, “Is this what the person does? What are some new things we might envision a person doing? How do we remove things that are no longer relevant to the position?” Corinne explained that the type of qualifications included in the job description, which are listed as required and preferred, help her to screen out unqualified applicants who might consider applying for the position instead of “getting any and everybody.”

Participants described how sometimes their preferences for preferred applicants become incorporated into a job description. By placing these preferences in writing, hiring participants explained that they are able to control the quantity and quality of applicants who apply for a position. For example, Corinne explained how she used the job description to keep the pool of applicants small. She stated, “We do list the qualifications so that we’re not just getting any and everybody. The way we list it is some stuff is required and some things are preferred.” William explained how he has seen the negative effects of not having the correct qualifications for a position included in a job description. In a previous job search process, William stated that he
was disappointed by how the human resources department had classified the position in student affairs. He explained that human resources only required applicants to possess a minimum of a bachelor’s degree. According to William, using a bachelor’s degree as the minimum credential to screen for resulted in numerous unqualified applicants being considered for a student affairs position. With a feeling of frustration, William stated, “They [human resources] would send over anyone who was qualified…” He added, “That’s why it’s so important for us to have that [job description] correct.”

Participants in this study described how job descriptions are sometimes reflect a combination of a preferences and other administrators on campus who are interested in the position. When it comes to writing the job description, Allan stated, “Typically that would be the person who’s going to be hiring…the hiring authority is going to be proposing going up getting approval, they’re going to be saying, this is what I want this person to be doing [and] getting some basic parameters around that.” However, most participants described a process where their preferences for preferred qualifications for applicants were either influenced by or dictated by various stakeholders who were vested in who gets considered for a position. Solange and Bethany admitted to having specific preferences about what to include in the job description, but indicated that others on their respective campuses had influence over the process. Solange explained that she consults with the vice-president of the college as well as the academic vice-president before finalizing a job description. When filling a position, Solange said that she has a “general conversation” with her supervisor to make sure everything is in order. She added, “

…and since we’re a private school, have those kind of informal conversations or prep conversations about what the position would look like. We may decide to modify it or it’s an opportunity to add something else to this position…”
Solange admitted that she puts her preferences aside when constructing job description because she knows that certain stakeholders on campus would not approve of certain types of applicants.

In another example, Bethany explained that human resources, as well as her supervisor, play a significant role in the construction of job descriptions. She noted that in order for her to get a quality applicant, she has to write job description for the human resources department to attract the right type of applicant. Participants asserted that how the job description is written determines how applicants will be screened for a position. Bethany, who must get approval from human resources when creating a job description, includes criteria in her job description that allows her to identify preferred applicants based on their years of experience and education background. Having the specific qualifications outlined is important because Bethany’s human resources department “has the initial ability to be the gatekeeper” for applicants applying for positions. She stated that in the past, “they just let people through” and that is why she typically organizes a meeting with their department to help them write the job description “that is going to be attractive to somebody looking for a job.” Bethany noted that this is important because her supervisor is particular about what types of applicants are screened for positions in student affairs.

**PHASE 2: Activation of Student Affairs Network**

The second phase in the screening process is Activation of Student Affairs Network. Activation of Student Affairs Network is defined as hiring managers’ utilization of personal and professional contacts to recruit preferred applicants to apply for a position. Student affairs network is defined as formal and informal relationships formed between hiring managers and their friends, colleagues, and members of professional organizations to promote available positions. Participants gain access to those networks through membership in student affairs
organizations and at student affairs organization conferences. Participants use their networks to strategically target where they will promote positions and identify organizations that will allow them to reach their preferred applicants for a position. Participants evidenced using student affairs networks as a screen to identify and/or promote available positions to preferred applicants.

Professionals in student affairs are closely connected to one another because of the memberships they maintain in professional associations, institutions where they are employed, and contacts they make through their graduate preparation programs in student affairs. Participants in this study described how membership and participation in student affairs professional organizations have played a significant role in their careers as well as their ability to screen potential applicants for positions. According to Corinne, It’s a small world when it comes to higher education and networking is a piece. It's because you get to know people through the different conferences… You might hook-up with them at a conference… Like wherever you went to graduate school, sometimes they’ll have their little receptions and then….Oh let me introduce you to so and so…

During conferences, participants meet-up with colleagues to exchange ideas and to fellowship with one another. Six out of seven participants in this study referenced conference attendance and/or membership in at least one student affairs professional organization as playing a significant role in their career.

Participants describe conference attendance as a place where professional relationships are formed into long-term friendships. Alan’s student affairs network has primarily been through his membership in the Association of College and University Housing Officers International. Alan stated that relationship with ACUHO-I goes back 27 years out of his more than 30 years in
student affairs. He explained that many of his closest and dearest friends started out as professional colleagues in ACUHO-I. He stated, “Whether it is my best man at my wedding or some of my best friends, all are housing directors and it is a reunion when we get together…..” Alan added, “ACUHO has been probably my basis for my entire career.” Other participants also attributed their membership in student affairs organizations for giving them student affairs network. Solange admitted that she maintains membership in NASPA and ACPA because of all the contacts and knowledge she gains from staying involved. Solange stated that there is great value in being able to have access to a diverse group of professionals who are current on the latest developments in student affairs. She stated, “I think I’ve just been trying to hang because I don’t want to lose my network with other camp…” Candi uses her professional network in student affairs as a resource during times when she needs help. Candi explained that through her network of colleagues she has met at conferences, she feels as though she can call on anyone at any given time if she ever needs anything. She stated, “I’ve met so many people across the state…across the country that I can contact [at] probably just about any school.”

William asserted that maintaining membership in professional organizations is essential if a professional wants to advance in their career. William attributed being hired as a dean of students early in his career to his involvement in the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Participants mentioned during interviews that using their membership in professional organizations allowed them access to applicants to screen applicants for available positions. William, Corinne, Jake and Alan have each been involved in some capacity with The Placement Exchange (TPE), a recruitment event for college student affairs professionals. TPE is sponsored by six national student affairs organizations and Higheredjobs.com and occurs prior to the start of NASPA’s annual conference. Jake described TPE as a “cattle call” where many participants
are graduate students in student affairs seeking employment. Some participants in this study used TPE to post jobs and screen for preferred applicants for available positions. Some participants used these types of events to identify potential applicants before doing a larger search. Applicants who make it through the initial screening at TPE often bypass some of the phases of the screening process. At the time of William’s interview, the NASPA conference and TPE, were a few weeks away. William, planned to attend, added,

There will probably be over thousand jobs listed in Baltimore [at TPE] and there will be at least a thousand student affairs professionals interviewing the whole heck of a lot of graduate students come out with a master’s degree. That’s where we typically find our best candidates.

Jake, who participated as a student in The Placement Exchange, admitted that he got his first job in student affairs through a contact he made at NASPA.

Participants referenced participation in recruitment activities at professional conferences as a way to promote available positions to a select group of applicants. William, who is heavily involved in NASPA, uses his membership in the organization to gain access to potential applicants without having to advertise for a position. William described how he attended a social event at a previous NASPA conference when he met his future dean of students. While William attended a social event, he used the opportunity to approach potential applicants about positions on his campus in an informally. Through this informal network at the conference, William was able to identify the type of applicants that he preferred for a position.

By operating within a close-knit community of student affairs professionals, hiring managers sometimes activate their networks by promoting vacant positions in unconventional ways. Some of those places include social media outlets and personal emails to friends. For
example, Jake uses his social network to attract potential applicants and his personal relationships with friends who work in student affairs as his network to promote available positions. He stated he used “word of mouth and friends of friends” to find potential applicants. He added, “[I] send emails out to colleagues throughout the region and other colleges that we might know.” Jake also said that he makes posts to his personal Facebook© account for his friends and student affairs colleagues to see. By using these channels to share information about available positions, Jake stated that he is more likely to attract the type of applicants that prefers because applicants are from referrals that have been screened by people that he already knows.

Student affairs networks also include student affairs faculty who teach in graduate preparation programs. Corinne will sometimes contact faculty at the graduate school at the University of South Carolina to promote available positions. Corinne stated that she reaches out to them because they are colleagues and she respects the quality of the students they recommend. Corinne described how she sends a job description through email to faculty who she believes can help her promote her positions. Corinne, who is Dean of Students, is also member of a Dean’s group and will sometimes use her professional colleagues at other institutions as a way to advertise vacant positions. She added, “We also use our personal connections as far as different associations we may be a part of and we will send it out.”

**PHASE 3: Filtering Applicants for Preferred Qualifications**

The third phase in the screening process is Filtering Applicants for Preferred Qualifications. Filtering Applicants for Preferred Qualifications is defined as the initial sorting of applications based on inclusion criteria in the job description used to identify preferred applicants for the position. Inclusion criterion is defined as hiring managers’ preferred characteristics hiring managers they believe applicants should possess to for a position.
Participants use the job description as a guide to determine what preferred qualifications and required qualifications to screen for. Applicants who do not meet hiring managers’ inclusion criteria are removed from the screening process and applicants who do meet the inclusion criteria remain in the applicant pool. Participants in this study screened applicants using human resources departments, hiring managers, or a combination of both human resources departments and hiring managers to identify preferred applicants. Participants evidenced using formal and informal techniques to screen applicants’ applications and identify those that meet the preferred qualifications for a position.

Participants described various processes to screen applicants for preferred qualifications. Participants in this study started the screening process by having applicants for a position using virtual human resources (VHR), an electronic screening process, to evaluate applicants, or to submit an application directly to the hiring manager. Corinne and Solange were the only participants who conducted an initial screening of applicants without assistance of human resources, while Candi, William, Jake, Alan, and Bethany each described a blended process that involved the human resources department conducting the initial screening and hiring managers doing a second screening.

Applicants were screened differently depending on how they submitted their application for a position. One difference between the screening process between Corinne and Solange’s schools and the other participants was every application that was submitted was screened directly by a hiring manager. Corinne and Solange both work at small, private schools where they are responsible for coordinating the initial screening process. Corinne and Solange explained that applicants must mail or submit through email their application materials to be considered for a position. Even though Corinne’s campus has a human resources department, she indicated they
had no involvement in the screening process. Solange’s campus does not have a human resources department; therefore, she is responsible for organizing the entire screening process starting with the initial evaluation of applicants. Corinne stated, “You look at every application that comes in.” She later added, “It’s a constant process of receiving the applications.” Corinne stated that she is looking to see if an applicant meets the minimum qualifications, such as the master’s degree and the required years of experience. Solange described her screening process as subjective. She has no formal process for evaluating applications. Moreover, because all of the applications go directly to Solange, she has the ability to remove any application she deems unqualified for a position, or reevaluate any applicant who she thinks should be reconsidered. For example, she stated applicants who do not have the right education background or appear to know nothing about the position, “can be screened from further consideration for the position.” She added, “…[We] really narrow down from the application materials how good of a match they are with the job as we described it and the kind of credentials and background that we’re looking for.”

Participants stated that applicants that apply for a position through human resources are screened twice; one time is an automated process absent of human involvement and the second screening is done by hiring managers. Candi, William, Jake, Alan and Bethany described how applicants on their campuses are initially screened by the human resources department. Participants explained that applicants must create an account so they can submit a general application to the college. Additionally, applicants are able to submit supporting documents which may include a resume, reference list, cover letter, and copies of unofficial college transcripts. Applicants who are reviewed by human are resources are not evaluated by a staff member. That means that there is no human bias involved in the process. Instead, human
resources will screen applications electronically using key words found in the job description (e.g., years of experience, has a master’s degree). Bethany admitted that she had no idea how human resources screened her applicants. Bethany, who discovered during our interview that human resources was using some type of rating system to screen applicants, described human resources at her institution as a “gatekeeper.” Bethany explained that she felt like human resources controlled her access to potential applicants because she was only allowed to evaluate the applications of applicants they gave her access to. Bethany admitted that she goes back through the applicants human resources screened to make sure she is getting the best possible applicants. William shared his own frustrations with the screening process when he talked about human resources’ involvement in the process. He asserted, “They have no idea what the student affairs profession is all about.” William expounded on his frustration by stating how he believed human resources was sometimes incapable of screening applicants for his division because they had no idea about the type of work student affairs professionals do.

Applications that make it through the initial screening process conducted by the human resources department do not automatically move forward to the next phase in the screening process. Participants described how they had login access to conduct an additional screen of applications before determining which applicants would move forward to the next phase. Participants indicated screening applicants’ resumes’ and other materials for criteria using a check-list. Bethany screens applicants’ application materials to see if they can communicate well. Bethany admitted that she is looking for a “tailored” and “targeted” cover letter to see how well they write. She described one applicant stating, “This person didn’t even tailor her cover letter so that it looks for us…I’m chucking that person out entirely because if that’s the level of detail you are paying to this search process, are you going to do it in your job.” Similarly,
William looks at applicants’ cover letters and asks the question, “Are they able to communicate well?” He added, “You don’t want to send me a job application for a professional position, a letter that has grammatical errors.” Solange agrees with the level of scrutiny given to applicants’ application materials because they allow her to see quality of an applicant. She stated, “… their cover letter, resume… are scrutinized [because] we have a pretty high level of expectations for how well that person represents themselves in their application materials as a professional.”

Participants are sometimes faced with having to narrow down more than 100 applicants to a pool of 25. In these situations, participants will sometimes engage a search committee to assist them with narrowing down the applicant pool. Jake indicated that he has been in charge of search committees with large applicant pools. At the time of his interview, he indicated he had just finished a job search that had 240 applicants. To narrow the pool of applicants, Jake uses a step-by-step process that involved going through human resources to narrow applicants with assistance from the search committee. He stated, “The first is filtering. We go through and we rank them and we have their total numbers. From there we’re able to filter down those individuals who have the most experience for the position that we’re filling.” Alan, who indicated that he gets hundreds of applications as well, stated that he starts reviewing applications soon as they start coming in. Alan admitted that he screens applicants’ qualifications by using a checklist to make sure “each resume is evaluated on a consistent measure.” He added, “I’m going back to do they have a master’s degree, do they have five years of experience or a master’s degree in student affairs.” Alan explained that he will allow his search committee to go online to the human resources website to help him screen applicants. He later replied, “Whatever the criteria would be that was written in the job description may be a check point they [applicants] would get.”
PHASE 4: Assessment of Candidates’ Fit

The fourth phase in the screening process is Assessment of Candidates’ Fit. Assessment of Candidates’ Fit is defined as hiring managers’ formal and informal evaluation of a select group of qualified applicants’ skills and abilities to do the job. Candidates are defined as applicants who have passed the initial screening phase and have been recommended for further screening. Fit is defined as hiring managers’ perception that the candidate possesses the right education background, experiences, competencies, and attitude to do the job. Participants evaluate fit by conducting initial interviews by telephone, identifying the best candidates, and inviting a select group to participate in on-campus interviews. Participants determine fit based on how well candidates respond to interview questions and scenarios fielded by search committees about the position. Participants evidenced using the results of formal and informal evaluation tools to determine which candidates have the best fit.

Participants in this study organized search committees to assist them with screening candidates for entry-level positions. Participants indicated that their role was to help screen candidates for a position by meeting with candidates one-on-one during telephone and on-campus interviews. Participants described search committees as a diverse group of individuals on campus vested into who is selected or the position. Participants stated that search committees average five to seven people and include students, faculty members, a representative from student affairs, and a member of the school administration. Participants indicated that hiring managers are responsible for coordinating the interview process and seeing that search committees provide feedback on their opinions about the best candidates.

Participants are looking to see if candidates can demonstrate they have more than the required academic background and years of experience. They are screening to see if candidates
can articulate their ability to do the job by responding to various questions and scenarios that simulate real-life experiences they might encounter if selected for a position. Participants in this study varied in how they screened their applicants during the interview phase. Solange’s school typically conducts two rounds of interviews to screen candidates. After conducting phone interviews for the first round, she stated, “Usually we try to narrow it down to about three that we want to invite on campus for interviews.” Solange explained that the interview process is one way hiring managers match the best candidates with the vacant position based on its qualifications. Unlike other participants in this study, Solange doesn’t use a formal evaluation form to identify the best applicants. She described the process as “subjective” because preferred applicants are chosen based on criteria that are based on her opinion of who might be the best applicant. Bethany explained how the campus interview is an opportunity for her to have candidates evaluated by various groups on campus. For instance, candidates will meet with the search committee, students, student affairs staff, and dining services, etc., to see how they handle themselves with people they might work with. Similarly, Alan makes sure on campus interviews consist of a full day of interviews. He stated, “They’re going to meet with the staff they’re going to supervise….they’re going to meet their peers during that process…They’ve got to spend time with their supervisor…” Alan explained that he wants to make sure that the candidate appears comfortable in each situation he places them in while on campus.

During the interview process, whether it is with the search committee, or different groups on campus the candidate would potentially work with, there is an evaluation. Hiring managers gather formal and informal data throughout each interview to evaluate their background, their experiences, and their ability to do the job. Some participants indicated using forms that were created to record information about each candidate. Participants also admitted to evaluating
candidates using various types of scoring techniques, while other participants had no formal process to evaluate participants. Six out of seven participants in this study used some type of assessment tool evaluate candidates for a position. Solange was the only hiring manager who did not have a formal evaluation process. Solange was also the only hiring manager that did not have a human resources department on campus.

Table 7 is a summary of the type of data hiring managers collected during the interview process. Two participants created their own forms to screen candidates, while four participants used forms that were created by the human resources department. All of the documents were used by the hiring manager and members of the search committee.
During the interview process, Corinne, Candi, and Jake provided me copies of the documents they used to screen applicants fit. After carefully reviewing each document, I noted the following about their evaluation forms:

1) Jake shared a packet he uses to guide his interview screening process. The copy of the packet he provided had seven pages, which included examples of different evaluation forms used in various student affairs positions at Jake’s school. Jake explained how the evaluation form was used by hiring managers, and search committees, to evaluate candidates’ competencies based on how they answered a list of interview questions. Candidates were expected to demonstrate the following competencies during telephone and on-campus interviews: communication, service orientation, teamwork, university values, decision-making and problem solving, and performance excellence. Each participant was scored using a Likert-scale and/or notes written about applicants’ responses to questions. Participants concluded their evaluation of each candidate by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Qualitative Data</th>
<th>Quantitative Data</th>
<th>Evaluation Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corinne</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Created by hiring manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solange</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candi</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Created by hiring manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Created by Human Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Created by Human Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Created by hiring manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Created by hiring manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
completing providing an overall score on each candidate using a form that was used to rank their student affairs experience.

2) Candi created her own form to screen candidates during the interview process. Candi provided me with a sample of the document she uses with her search committee. Upon further review, I noted that the document showed that applicants were being evaluated based on whether or not they demonstrated an ability to perform certain duties. For example, this particular form indicated that candidates were scored on their ability to do career services, data management, event planning, student engagement, and work-flow management. Candi’s form scored candidates using a Likert-scale that included four levels that ranged from “extremely well” to “poor.” Additionally, Candi included a section on the form to provide written responses, in order to describe one’s perceptions and opinions about what they liked least and what they liked most about each candidate.

3) Corinne provided an excel spreadsheet that she created to screen candidates who interviewed for a position. I noted that Corinne’s evaluation form looked similar to an Excel© spreadsheet. Across the top were six headings. In each column the following categories were listed: first name, last name, comments, recommend, recommend with reservations, and do not recommend. Corinne’s evaluation form required that she and the search committee write a brief narrative about each candidate. No scoring methods were used. After the telephone interviews, Corinne explained how she compiled the names of the top candidates to determine who would move on to the on-campus interview. Next, the same steps were repeated during the second interview to screen the smaller group of applicants.
Participants demonstrated the multiple ways that hiring managers engage candidates during the interview process. Candi explained that faculty who participate on search committees she has facilitated ask some of the best “situational questions” to screen a candidates’ fit for a position. For example, hiring managers will ask “what if” questions to evaluate how a candidate will handle situations like a student who is having personal problems or their approach to handing a difficult situation. As Chief Student Affairs Officer, William admitted he asks deeper questions to get at candidates’ true motivation for going into the student affairs profession. In response to what “a good fit means,” William added, “It means first you have the intellectual and professional capabilities to do a job. The second thing is you understand what the mission of these universities is all about.” Some questions William has asked in previous interviews are intended to determine if they are fit for a position. For example, William has asked, “Why are they in student affairs?” and “Name and define a student development theory.” Participants explained that the interview process allows candidates to illustrate that their background and experiences go beyond the initial application screening. The interviews are an opportunity for hiring managers to screen candidates to confirm they not only have the right background, but they also can demonstrate through their responses to questions their ability to do the job they are seeking.

**PHASE 5: Synthesis to Recommend Finalists**

The final phase of the screening process is Synthesis to Recommend Finalists. Synthesis to Recommend Finalists is defined as hiring managers’ integration of subjective and objective evidence of top candidates’ qualifications to support which applicants should be endorsed for the position. Finalists are defined as candidates who have made it past the initial phases in the screening process and are considered to be a contender for the vacant position. Participants
compared their preferences, along with feedback from the search committee and campus stakeholders, to recommend top finalists for a position. Campus stakeholders are faculty, staff, students, and other individuals who are vested in the position. Participants evidenced gathering a consensus amongst all individuals involved in the screening process to determine which candidates are recommended to be a finalist for the position.

In the final phase of screening, participants consolidate information received about each candidate that is being considered for a position. Participants will do no additional screening of candidates after this phase. Participants consolidate information from search committee recommendations, campus faculty and staff, campus administrators, students and anyone who has been involved in the screening process. Additionally, hiring managers seek independent feedback from references, external to the campus, to provide further information about the top candidates. Candi stated, “References are a big deal.” Candi explained that references tell you, how long they’ve worked in student affairs. Where they’ve worked. The specific things they created, if they created anything. How long they were in a position. How frequently they moved in jobs.

In one search process she indicated that she did not hire someone because their references were awful. William also places a high importance on references. During his interview he provided an example of how he uses his extensive network in student affairs to screen candidates. William described how he sometimes reference checks candidates’ by asking them how well they know a professor in their graduate program. Because William knows a lot of faculty in student affairs preparation programs, he admitted that he will ask, “Do you know such and such?” After checking on who a candidate knows, William said, “I'll go talk to their references
so we can get a notion of their real qualities and things that we saw gaps in their credentials on what these people may be able to testify about.”

Participants indicated that they are ultimately looking for a consensus amongst all interested parties before they make their recommendations for finalists for a position. Bethany describes herself as “democratic leader” who is “going to look for a consensus” between she, the search committee, and her boss when recommending finalists. Bethany stated that she wants to pick a finalist “she can live with,” but also know that sometimes she will have to battle with the recommendations her boss might make. She recalled a situation where she had an applicant who her boss did not care for because their background did not meet is approval, but she decided to fight for them anyway. Bethany explained that she asks herself questions to see if she is building a consensus amongst interested parties. Bethany stated, “What are we looking for in this person? What do we want? What is our most important quality?” Solange, who also like to build consensus, stated, “A consensus must be obtained from the group regarding the top candidate after all of the campus interviews are conducted with the finalists.”

Solange stated that she achieves consensus by combining the recommendations of each search committee member, along with her preferences for a preferred applicant, and the feedback she has received from top administration. Corinne gains consensus by looking for similarities in the recommendations amongst search committee members, and when there is a tie, she makes the deciding vote.

Participants sometimes have to get approval of their senior level administrators on campus to make their finalists’ recommendations. Jake uses data recommendations of search committee members made in Phase 4 to help him determine the top finalists. However, he stated that he also has to get additional approval. Jake added,
The committee will typically make the pitch of who they feel is the most qualified candidate. The hiring manager will then take the committee’s information into consideration and make their pitch to the Dean of Students and President of the Campus. Alan follows a similar approach when making his recommendations for finalists. After the search committee makes recommendations to the hiring manager about what candidates should be chosen to be a finalists for a position, Alan stated, “The final decision is typically made by the person who will be supervising this position, but it might be the next person up the reporting chain, with approval from the Director or AVP [Associate Vice President].”

Section Summary

This section presented the findings that answered the research question: What is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs? The evidence demonstrated the following themes: 1) Construction of Job Description; 2) Activation of Student Affairs Network; 3) Filtering Applicants for Preferred Qualifications; 4) Assessment of Candidates’ Fit; and 5) Synthesis to Recommend Finalists. The findings showed that each phase represents a separate and unique part of the screening process to narrow a pool of applicants.

Hiring managers begin screening applicants from the inception of the job description. During each phase in the process, hiring manager are evaluating the position, the preferred applicants, and screening applicants for the position. In Phase 1, participants create job descriptions as a mechanism to identify preferred applicants and to eliminate others. By placing certain qualifications in a job description, potential applicants will either apply or remove themselves from the process. In Phase 2, participants screen applicants by strategically promoting vacant positions to their personal and professional networks that are not available to all applicants. Participants in this study are screening for certain types of applicants and
therefore, limit how and where they promote a position. For instance, hiring managers may choose to keep the advertisements for a position limited to professional student affairs organizations and clusters of professional groups in student affairs where they maintain memberships. Doing this places the information for positions directly in the hands of the type of people who will know the type of quality applicants a hiring manager is looking for. Thus, potential applicants who are not connected to these types of networks would be unaware of certain vacancies and therefore, be screened out of applying for a position.

Participants continue to screen applicants in Phases 3-5 by creating inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria to screen which applicants will remain in the applicant pool. The inclusion criteria are based on participants’ mental models which will be discussed in the next section.

**Chapter Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ screening of applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas. Chapter four presented the findings of two research questions which guided this study. To answer the purpose question, it was necessary to answer each research question first. The findings for the first research question identified five mental models, which were exhibited by participants in this study: Traditional Educational Backgrounds are Most Credible, Practical Application of Required Knowledge, Personality Aligns With Job Expectations, Ability to Adapt to Campus Environment, and Career Continuity. The findings for the second research question identified five phases used by participants to screen entry-level applicants in student affairs: Phase 1: Construction of Job Description, Phase 2: Activation of Student Affairs Network, Phase 3: Filtering Applicants for

The findings in this study provided evidence that applicant screening is a subjective process influenced by hiring managers’ preferences. Participants’ demonstrated a close connection between hiring managers’ mental models when screening applicants for entry-level positions in student affairs. Participants evidenced that mental models are not a separate and independent action from screening. Hiring managers influence the screening process with their mental models unconsciously by using their mental images of preferred applicants throughout each aspect of the screening process. Moreover, mental models are embedded in hiring managers’ subconscious; therefore, prohibiting participants from separating their biases and assumptions about preferred applicants from the process.

In Phase 4, participants rely on their mental models to assist them with evaluation applicants’ fit for the position. The evidence supporting the finding for Phase 4 described how participants based the types of interview questions asked to candidates on the types of skills and abilities they wanted candidates to demonstrate. For example, fit was defined as hiring managers’ perception that the candidate possesses the right education background, experiences, competencies, and attitude to do the job. These character traits which participants wanted to demonstrate in their interviews were based on their mental models for preferred applicants. During the interview phase, participants were screening to see if applicants could illustrate the following mental models: traditional education backgrounds, practical experience in student affairs, and personalities that were appropriate for the expectations of the job.

During the screening process, participants who demonstrated a strong preference for traditional schools could choose to only select applicants with that type of background.
Participants described various phases during the screening process where they could use their influence of their mental model to make a screening decision. For instance, during phase three, participants explained how they had the opportunity to go through the applicant pool and determine which applicants met the qualifications for a position. Participants also screened applicants who possessed the preferences they evidenced in their mental model for preferred applicants. For instance, participants indicated that they preferred traditional schools, career continuity, and direct experience in the form of graduate assistantships. Participants used those mental models for preferred applicants as a lens for selecting applicants who only meet those preferences. In a similar scenario, participants also evidenced how their campus environment also had an influence on the type of applicant they screened for a position. Participants in this study explained how they preferred applicants with attitudes that would align with the campus environment. When screening applicants during phase four, participants explained how they conducted interviews to determine if an applicant was a good fit for the position. Part of that fit is to possess the right personality. One personality that participants preferred was flexibility. By participants interviewing applicants either on the phone or on-campus, participants can evaluate applicants to see whether or not their responses align with their mental model for preferred personalities for applicants in student affairs.

Participants’ mental models and their screening processes work in tandem with one another. Participants unconsciously use their mental models as a lens to facilitate how they screening applicants in student affairs. Chapter 4 introduced the findings for his study and the assumptions that could be drawn from the evidence that was provided. Based on the findings and chapter conclusion, the implications for practice, discussion, and recommendations for future research based on these findings will be outlined in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to understand how mental models influence hiring managers’ screening of applicants for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional colleges and universities in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are hiring managers’ mental models for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

2. What is the screening process for entry-level positions in college student affairs at traditional schools in the Carolinas (North Carolina and South Carolina) region of the United States?

This basic qualitative study investigated hiring managers’ mental models used to screen applicants for entry-level positions in student affairs. Seven participants were identified from a purposeful sample in North Carolina and South Carolina from traditional, private and public not-for-profit colleges and universities, to explore the preferences and biases that exist in screening applicants for entry-level positions. Participants in this study represented various backgrounds in student affairs which included years of experience, type of institution where employed, size of the institution, title of job. Participants each had experience as hiring managers and had participated on at least 3 search committees in the past 5 years. By focusing this study on participants at traditional college campuses, I was able to capture the essence of what types of preferences hiring managers possess for a typical entry-level position in student affairs. Six out of
7 participants engaged in 2 interviews to discuss what they look for in applicants for entry-level positions. The findings revealed that hiring managers’ possess five mental models which represent their preferences for preferred entry-level applicants in student affairs. Further, this study revealed that hiring managers go through 5 Phases to screen applicants. Moreover, during the screening process, it was revealed that mental models play a critical role in how hiring managers implement each phase. By understanding hiring managers’ mental models, I was able to understand in each screening phase how hiring managers’ preferences for certain types of applicants influence the screening process.

The purpose of this chapter is to present my conclusions for each research question, discuss the implications for practice, and make recommendations for future research. This chapter will include the following sections: Conclusions and Discussion, Implications for Personal and Professional Practice, and Recommendations for Future Research.

**Conclusions and Discussion**

This section presents conclusions and discussion for this basic qualitative study. Three conclusions were drawn from the analysis of the data: 1) Bias exists in the student affairs hiring process toward traditional schools, which may exclude candidates from proprietary schools in the screening process; 2) Subjective aspects of applicant screening reflect a mixture of dynamic contextual factors influenced by the attitudes and opinions of hiring managers and other campus stakeholders; and 3) The mental models of hiring managers in college student affairs at traditional schools include preference for applicants with traditional career paths. The following three sections will expound on these conclusions and discuss how they connect to the recent literature and the conceptual framework that guided this study.
Conclusion One: Bias exists in the student affairs hiring process toward traditional schools, which may exclude candidates from proprietary schools in the screening process.

The first conclusion of this study is bias exists in the student affairs hiring process toward traditional schools, which may exclude candidates from proprietary schools in the screening process. Participants described traditional schools as “credible,” “the tried and true path to a career in student affairs,” “familiar,” and “reputable.” Participants strongly prefer traditional schools and believe applicants who attend these institutions make better applicants for positions in student affairs. This conclusion supports the finding of participants’ mental model traditional educational backgrounds are most credible.

When screening for positions, Arrow (1973) stated hiring managers make decisions based on where applicants went to school. Moreover, Connolly and Diepebrock (2011) stated hiring managers will base their decisions on what they know about the applicant’s education background or what they know to be true about their education background. The conceptual framework for this study suggests that mental models are the impetus for shaping hiring managers’ screening decisions and determining which applicants’ education backgrounds are most preferred. Mental models are not always based on fact, but rather they represent hiring managers’ cognitive images of preferred applicants based on biases, assumptions, and beliefs. Once mental models are formed about an applicant, they are hard to change; therefore, applicants from proprietary school may not be treated equally.

Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) stated hiring managers preferred applicants from traditional schools because students attend classes face-to-face in a physical classroom. In-class experiences are perceived to be better by hiring managers because they are taught by faculty and provide its students with a higher level of discourse (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly &
Diepenbrock, 2011). Connolly and Diepenbrock’s study supports hiring managers’ mental model for traditional educational backgrounds and their assumption that traditional schools are more reputable. Participants believed that traditional schools were more reputable and a certain level a quality because their classes were taught in a physical classroom. Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) found 76.6 percent of hiring managers perceive degrees earned online to be unequal to traditional master’s degrees. Some participants, who stated they had preferences for traditional educational backgrounds, also expressed disapproval of proprietary schools. Similarly, Adams and DeFleur (2005) found that hiring managers had a feeling of mistrust towards proprietary schools because of their perception that cheating was more prevalent than at traditional schools.

Research has shown that hiring managers in student affairs are unfamiliar with the quality of online schools; therefore they showed preference to applicants of traditional schools (Adams & DeFleur, 2005; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Participants admitted to knowing little to nothing about proprietary schools. Other participants, like Alan, William, and Solange knew a lot about proprietary schools, but only from negative experiences they had had with previous applicants. Participants stated they were either unwilling or unable to give applicants from proprietary schools consideration. Both Adams and DeFleur (2005) and Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) stated that hiring managers who had little knowledge about the value of degrees earned online showed bias to applicants when screening applicants for positions. Many student affairs leaders are lack this knowledge because they have ignored the fact that proprietary schools are now offering more graduate preparation programs in student affairs (Dungy & Gordon, 2004; Hughley & Burke, 2010). Participants’ demonstrate their mental model for traditional education background by
gravitating toward applicants who attended traditional schools during the screening process. Participants evidenced using a sorting method in Phase 3 of the screening process to separate applicants from the applicant pool who meet their mental model for preferred qualifications.

Participants also demonstrate their bias toward traditional schools by favoring applicants from schools they were familiar with. Participants evidenced their preferences by using their personal networks in student affairs to identify preferred applicants. Participants credit organizations like the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators, American College Personnel Association, and the Association of College and University Housing Officers International for shaping their careers and creating many of the personal friendships that make-up their network. These professional organizations, whose membership is predominantly from traditional schools, are an important resource for participants when filling a position. Participants indicated they will go to colleagues in student affairs, student affairs professionals who have become their friends, and attend professional conferences to advertise positions that will help them identify applicants from traditional schools. Corinne actively seeks out potential applicants using her network when she has a position to fill and William recruits informally at social functions while at NASPA. Because participants use these types of outlets to identify applicants, they are limiting access to positions to graduates of traditional schools.

The study’s findings indicate participants’ mental model for traditional schools has a direct impact on how proprietary schools are perceived in the screening process. Therefore, applicants who have backgrounds from these types of institutions may not receive favorable consideration by hiring managers at traditional schools. Participants will then unconsciously use their mental model as a lens to identify their preferred applicant during a search process.
(Chermack, 2003; Korte, 2003); therefore, excluding applicants who do not meet the requirements.

Participants explained that they preferred schools that they were familiar with, such as schools like the ones they attended and those they believed had a good reputation (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Conolly & Diepenbrock, 2011; Lee & Topper, 2006). Therefore, bias exists in screening processes toward proprietary schools (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011), and will continue to exist, because hiring managers do not know much about them. These perceptions have more weight on participants’ decision-making processes than the assumptions that they have toward proprietary schools. Therefore, the fact that little knowledge exists about proprietary schools amongst hiring managers at traditional schools supports the conclusion that proprietary schools may be excluded in screening processes.

**Conclusion Two: Subjective aspects of applicant screening reflect a mixture of dynamic contextual factors influenced by the attitudes and opinions of hiring managers and other campus stakeholders.**

The second conclusion of this study is subjective aspects of applicant screening reflect a mixture of dynamic contextual factors influenced by the attitudes and opinions of hiring managers and other campus stakeholders. Campus stakeholder is defined as faculty, staff, and other individuals at the institution who are internal and external to the screening process. Internal campus stakeholders are faculty, staff, and colleges who serve on the search committee. External campus stakeholders are faculty, staff, and administrators (e.g. human resources) who work on campus. Participants described applicant screening as an objective process intertwined with preference for preferred applicants from everyone on campus vested in the process.
Throughout each phase of the screening process, participants are responsible for making screening decisions that will ultimately impact the type of applicant who is recommended for a position. Even though the screening process is set-up to be an objective evaluation of applicants for a position, there are elements of subjectivity throughout the process due to the presence of human involvement. During each phase of screening, participants had to draw upon their personal experiences to assist them with identifying applicants who they believed could do the job. Brown (2001) stated that hiring managers’ decision-making involves weeding out applicants who meet the preferred qualifications for a position. However, that process is not independent of various contextual factors that contributed to hiring managers’ screening of applicants.

One of those factors that contributed to hiring managers’ screening is how the applicant initially applied for the position. Five out of seven participants indicated their campus used electronic application processes initiated by the human resources department. The use of electronic tools to make screening decisions through human resources has automated much of what hiring managers would do on their own (Buckley, et. al., 2004; Chapman & Webster, 2003). Electronic screening is very different from screening applicants by hand, according to two participants whose campuses did not use human resources to screen applicants. Bennett (2009) stated that virtual human resources (VHR) is a new innovation in human resources to assist hiring managers with screening applicants. It entails web-based screening of applicants’ applications using key words or phrases created by a computer application to identify applicants who meet the qualifications for a position (Buckley, et. al., 2004; Chapman & Webster, 2003). Organizations that use virtual screening are able to influence which applicants are considered for a position (Buckley, et. al., 2004; Chapman & Webster, 2003) because they are able to remove
all bias from the process. Applicants who apply electronically are screened objectively, which means that some applicants are no longer able to benefit from hiring managers’ subjective use of their mental model. Web-based screening is unbiased because VHR eliminates race, gender, and socioeconomic factors when evaluating applicants for positions (Chapman & Webster, 2003).

Participants who use VHR as part of their process indicated that technology has definitely impacted their screening results. For example, Bethany has no idea about all of the applicants who have applied for positions on her campus because human resources only lets her see applications from individuals who met the initial screening criteria. Candi and Bethany, whose campuses both use VHR, described how they will access their applicant pool electronically using a password to conduct Phase 3 of the screening process. It is only where there is a human factor involved that hiring managers are able to insert their attitudes and opinions about which applicant they prefer.

Mental models are a lens used to screen applicants (Chermack, 2003) and the conceptual framework identifies environmental factors as being a part of the various influences that go into determining what they are screening. Johnson-Laird and Byrne (1991) stated that the mental models represent one’s beliefs are a direct result of their deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is not logical, but rather influenced by their experiences, background, and environment in order to draw conclusions about an applicant’s background (Johnson-Laird & Byrne, 1991). Some of those environmental influences include campus stakeholders who may be internal or external to the screening process. Participants in this study described how screening decisions are often impacted by individuals on campus who are vested in who is selected for a position. These environmental factors infuse themselves into the process even though participants stated they had the responsibility of leading the search process to identify the best applicants for a
Corinne described how she chaired a search committee that had a faculty member participating, who refused to consider any applicants from proprietary schools. While screening applicants, she said the faculty member stated, “I just toss those [from proprietary schools] out immediately.” Solange has had similar experiences with faculty exerting their position on campus. Solange admitted that she tries to maintain a level of integrity within the student affairs division by hiring applicants with traditional education backgrounds, but admitted that she struggles with yielding to the pressures of faculty on her campus who said they would not support her if she hired applicants from proprietary schools. Although Alan didn’t experience pressure from faculty, he explained that he must go to senior level administration to get final approval on all aspects of the search process, including the creation of the job description. Alan is a director who supervises more than 100 employees, but admitted that he must still go “up the chain for approval” until the person who is recommended for the position is identified.

Previous research has shown that hiring managers bring their own personal biases into the screening process. These biases, which have been identified in this study as mental models, guide participants through the various phases of screening (Chermack, 2003). Forrester (1961, 1988) illustrated how complex problems were solved by showing how mental models play a critical role in influencing how decisions are made. Based on the mental models evidenced in Chapter 4 (Table 5), hiring managers’ mental models impact each element of the screening phase. These phases, however, do not only reflect only the mental models of participants, they are also incorporated the external attitudes and opinions shared by campus stakeholders on
campus. Table 8 provides a summary of how the screening process is influenced by hiring managers’ mental models as well as internal and external stakeholders.

**Table 8**

*How Mental Models’ Influence Screening Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Screening Phase</th>
<th>Influence of Mental Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHASE 1: Construction of Job Description</strong></td>
<td>Hiring managers use their mental model for preferred applicants to create a job description. Hiring managers obtain input from <em>internal/external stakeholders</em> about applicant qualifications for a position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHASE 2: Activation of Student Affairs Network</strong></td>
<td>Hiring managers contact colleagues and friends in student affairs to target preferred applicants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHASE 3: Filtering Applicants for Preferred Qualifications</strong></td>
<td>Hiring managers screen applicants based on inclusion/exclusion (e.g., mental models) criteria. <em>Internal/external stakeholders</em> exert opinions and preferences to influence screening of applications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHASE 4: Assessment of Candidates’ Fit</strong></td>
<td>Applicants are evaluated for positions based on criteria influenced by hiring managers’ mental model for preferred applicants. <em>Internal stakeholders</em> exert influence on search committees. <em>External stakeholders</em> exert influence during campus interview process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHASE 5: Synthesis to Recommend Finalists</strong></td>
<td>Hiring managers use their mental model to help them identify the top applicant. <em>External stakeholders</em> influence and/or approve recommended finalists.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Past research has shown that the environment in which a screening decision is made can change over a period of time (Korte, 2003). Participants, depending on their campus and its culture, can make different decisions for a position. Hiring managers who succumb to internal and external influences may change their mental model to fit the particular situation (Chermack, 2003). Overcoming biases in education screening is a challenge for many hiring managers (Chermack, 2003) who have a long history of hiring applicants with backgrounds like them. The findings suggest that applicant screening is subjective and not without influence from multiple
constituents on campus. Mental models represent hiring managers’ preferences, yet they also promote certain biases about what types of applicants they are seeking (Chermack, 2003) on a particular campus. Therefore, this conclusion demonstrates that search processes are filled with opinions and biases of solely the hiring manager. Screening processes are filled with subjective aspects within the process that represent the multiple attitudes and assumptions held by campus stakeholders.

Conclusion Three: Mental models of hiring managers in college student affairs at traditional schools include preference for applicants with traditional career paths.

The third conclusion is the mental models of hiring managers in college student affairs at traditional schools include preference for applicants with traditional career paths. Participants defined traditional career path as applicants with a bachelor’s and master’s degrees from traditional schools, with little to no gap between their academic credentials. Participants worked the majority of their career in student affairs and followed a career pathway that demonstrated a commitment to the profession by having limited experiences outside of student affairs. This conclusion supports participants’ mental model career continuity, which exhibits preferences for applicants who possess the majority of their work experiences in student affairs.

Bills (1988b) note that screening of applicants is based on their educational attainment. Bills questioned hiring managers’ perception of educational credentials using various credentialing theories and found that hiring managers often exaggerate one’s educational credentials when making screening decisions (Bills, 1988a). Coupled with the fact that one’s educational path can influence their career path, Green and Ridenour (2004) noted that going into a particular career field does not happen without the right preparation. Applicants who desire a career in student affairs must plan appropriately for it if they want to obtain an entry-level
position. Gaps in employment are perceived negatively by many hiring managers (Fournier, Zimmerman & Gauthier, 2011). Participants also indicated that applicants who choose other careers before going into student affairs will find gaining employment in student affairs a challenge.

Participants defined non-traditional career paths as applicants who have large gaps (e.g., 10 years) between their bachelor’s and master’s degree and/or have resumes filled with years of experience in positions unrelated to student affairs. For example, Alan encountered applicants in residence life who had retail and criminal justice experience. Research has shown that individuals can sometimes derail their career path by the type of employment they obtain (Fournier, et. al., 2011; Kim, 2012). Jake said that he is not looking for applicants who are far removed from being an undergraduate student. In his opinion, they cannot relate to the students they will work with. He stated, “If someone finished undergrad and then worked outside of the field five, ten years….I don’t know that’s the career path I’m looking for.” Participants are screening for applicants who worked in student affairs, like they did, in areas like residence life, admissions, student activities, etc. or as a graduate assistant while pursuing their master’s degree.

Kim (2012) found that individuals can derail their ability to obtain positions that advance their career trajectory if they do not possess the right experiences. Green and Ridenour (2004) stated that individuals who want to a particular career must make conscious decisions to prepare themselves appropriately. Participants believed some applicants apply for positions because they believe they can do the job, but end up quitting after realizing they cannot. Moore’s (2006) findings suggest that individuals’ decisions to go into a particular field must be cultivated over a long period of time. Moore added that individuals must also make a conscious decision about
what career path they desire because entering a particular field (e.g., student affairs) will not occur immediately.

Participants are screening applicants whose decision to go into a student affairs career appears to be a “logical step as opposed to a big jump.” Alan explained that applicants need to demonstrate that they are focused on a student affairs career and have experiences that will allow them to relate to the position. Alan stated that applicants who have worked at Best Buy do not represent the mental model for a logical career path. Positions in student affairs are not available to every applicant because they possess a master’s degree (Bills, 1988a). Individuals must assess their goals and abilities and follow a planned sequence of steps to get there (Green & Ridenour, 2004). Participants reinforce their preference for a traditional pathway with their mental model career trajectory which gives preference to applicants that have followed a logical career path that includes work related to student affairs. This conclusion demonstrates the importance of a traditional path that is planned and calculated (Green & Ridenour, 2004; Moore, 2006). Applicants who desire a career in student affairs must make conscious decisions while an undergraduate student, in order to plan a career path that will allow them to enter the profession.

Implications for Personal and Professional Practice

The findings for this study lend well to several areas within higher education in the areas of human resource development, membership in student affairs organizations, screening processes, and graduate preparation programs. The recommendations for practice are based on ways to increase education and communication between traditional and proprietary schools and/or graduate preparation programs. Based on my conclusions, I have provided two sections to address my recommendations for practice. The first section will discuss what I will change and the second section will discuss what I recommend, as a result of this study.
Implications for Personal Practice

The first change that I will make as a hiring manager is to encourage more diversity in the types of applicants hired for positions in student affairs. Hiring managers’ mental model for applicants with traditional education backgrounds may limit the diversity within the profession by hiring professionals who are similar to each other. By considering applicants with different education backgrounds and experiences, the profession gain from having a multitude of skills and abilities that will meet the needs of a more diverse student population. By adding a mental model that includes applicants from non-traditional education backgrounds, such as applicants who attended proprietary schools, I am able to increase my tool box of skill sets acquired within entry-level professionals in student affairs to serve students at traditional schools who may be non-traditional students and/or learners.

Students today are no longer choosing to attend classes face-to-face in the classroom for various reasons. Some students must work while attending school and others may find the convenience of attending classes online more conducive to their lifestyle. Traditional schools are increasingly offering more classes and degree programs online to these types of students. For example, Northeastern has several programs that are offered online with little to no residency requirements in Boston. Students are able to obtain a quality education without the responsibility of reporting to a class on campus at a specific time of day. Therefore, a new type of student affairs professional is needed to address the needs of these types of learners. Hiring managers must now consider changing their mental model for preferred student affairs professionals to increase the diversity of individuals who can serve the changing student population. Applicants who have only experienced a traditional education background may limit the type of students they can reach. Applicants from proprietary schools bring a wide range of
skills that applicants from traditional schools may not. Applicants from proprietary schools are extremely knowledgeable about distance education because they have been personally experienced what it is like to be a distance learner. Therefore, as traditional schools increase their offerings of online degree programs, they need to provide student services to these students. Applicants who attended proprietary have acquired certain skill sets that come with going to school online. These applicants understand how to operate in a virtual community and be successful. They are familiar with the needs of online students, such as using library services, writing and tutoring services for doing class assignments, and how to interact with faculty and staff within a virtual learning community.

The second change I will make as a result of the findings is to educate undergraduate students who desire a career in student affairs the various pathways to obtaining an entry level position. Based on the conclusions of my study, some of the things I would emphasize to students would include: enrolling in a graduate preparation program in student affairs immediately after completing a bachelor’s degree to establish career continuity, finding a graduate program that provides opportunities to get practical experience to demonstrate practical application of required knowledge, and attending student affairs conferences to create a network of student affairs professionals within the field. These conclusions support my findings for hiring managers’ mental models which describe hiring managers’ preference for certain types of applicants for entry-level positions in student affairs: a traditional education background, practical experience in student affairs, an ability to adapt to the campus environment, personality that aligns with the position, and career continuity. Therefore, I would educate students about what are some common preferences shared by hiring managers at traditional
schools and what it means for students who desire a career in student affairs at a traditional school.

Each mental model, while not held by all hiring managers, provides insight as to what hiring managers value in entry-level applicants. I would explain to students that hiring managers sometimes show their preferences as biases toward applicants that represent their particular mental model, which can prevent them from receiving full consideration for a position. For example, students would need to recognize some of the challenges they might encounter they chose to obtain their master’s degree from a non-traditional program. To overcome this bias, I would explain to students that they could minimize this potential bias by obtaining more experiences in another area that meet hiring managers’ mental models. Since mental models can be diverse between hiring managers and fluctuate in their level of preference with each individual, students can overcome their difference in background by meeting other hiring managers’ preferences. For example, students can focus on making sure they obtained lots of experience in student affairs. Whether it is while an undergraduate student or working as a graduate assistant while pursuing a master’s degree, students must recognize the importance hiring managers’ need for applicants who have practical experience.

**Implications for the Field**

The first recommendation is for program directors at proprietary schools to re-design their graduate programs to include hiring managers’ mental model practical application of required knowledge. Having a master’s degree in student affairs is not enough to gain employment in student affairs. The findings indicate participants value not just possession of the appropriate degree, but they also prefer applicants with direct experience that demonstrate they can do the job. Participants preferred applicants who had similar experiences to the job which
they had applied, by volunteering as an undergraduate student or working in student affairs as a graduate student.

Proprietary schools may not have a physical campus where its online students can work, but they can create partnerships with traditional schools that do not have a master’s degree program in student affairs on their campus. Participants prefer applicants who have worked a graduate assistantship or completed a practicum or internship. These types of experiences not only demonstrate an applicant’s ability to do a job, but it also provides them with knowledge about student affairs.

Proprietary schools can support students’ employability by providing experiential opportunities to work in student affairs. One way proprietary schools could provide their students with hands-on experience would be to partner to other institutions, like community colleges and four-year traditional schools, to create graduate assistantships where they can work. Community colleges have admission offices, student activities, career services, and financial aid offices, etc. that provide valuable learning opportunities. Proprietary schools can also reach out to four-year residential colleges that do not have preparation programs in student affairs, to secure graduate assistantships for their graduate students. These partnerships not only provide learning opportunities for students, but they also provide traditional schools with para-professionals who can expand their staffs and provide opportunities to educate one another about proprietary schools.

The second recommendation is that proprietary schools, their faculty, and master’s degree level students increase their level participation in student affairs professional organizations like the American College Personnel Association and the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators. By participating in these types of organizations, proprietary
schools and those who are affiliated with them, begin to expand the student affairs network that exists within student affairs professional at traditional schools. Participants referenced their affiliation with professional organizations as playing a big role in their professional careers and helping them build long-term friendships with other professionals who are also in student affairs.

Having access to this network of professionals is critical for anyone who wants to stay connected to the profession and increase their career trajectory. As mentioned in Chapter 4, participants stated that they will sometimes attend professional conferences to participate in screening events, like The Placement Exchange, to identify potential employees for positions. Some participants indicated they either hired someone or were hired themselves from contacts made while attending professional conferences in student affairs. In addition, hiring managers also used networks to advertise positions if they were looking for identify someone that came recommended through a familiar source. For instance, Corinne mentioned that she sometimes emails the graduate coordinator at the University of South Carolina to get referrals for applicants.

Participants indicated that they used personal friendships with colleagues, classmates, and relationships established by participating at student affairs conferences to develop their network. This is why it is necessary for anyone who desires a career in student affairs to be active in the profession. Sometimes positions are not advertised and therefore it is necessary to have a network to gain access to professional opportunities. William indicated that he got his first Dean position through a contact he made while volunteering with ACPA. Therefore, it is necessary for professionals to develop a professional network of their own and include student affairs professionals who are connected to the field.

Finally, my third recommendations is that professional organizations in student affairs, whose memberships are primarily professionals from traditional schools, become more inclusive.
NASPA and ACPA are two of the leading professional organizations for student affairs practitioners and administrators; however, they are not representative all types higher education institutions. To become have the student affairs profession become more inclusive, I would recommend that these organizations find creative ways to involve and engage professionals who work at these types of institutions.

One way to bridge the divide is to create a division within the overall membership and dedicate it to issues focused on proprietary schools. Presently, both organizations have divisions under the umbrella of the larger organization that allow members of similar type institutions to connect with colleagues about issues that only their institutions face. For instance, NASPA currently has three divisions dedicated to institutional type where professionals in student affairs can affiliate: community colleges, small colleges and universities, and an international advisory board. By professional organizations making themselves more inclusive and welcoming to student affairs professionals from all types of higher education institutions, there is a greater chance to break down the lack of knowledge and bias that exists within the traditional student affairs community toward proprietary schools. Lack of knowledge about proprietary schools was one reason why several participants were uncertain about non-traditional schools’ ability to prepare applicants for positions in student affairs.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

Over the past year I have grown in my knowledge about qualitative research and applicant screening. My confidence in understanding the data analysis process has allowed me to be stronger in my interpretation of participant interviews. As a result, my findings are much richer and provide greater understanding about hiring managers’ mental models. My purpose for starting this study resulted from numerous questions and concerns I had about which education
backgrounds provide the best preparation for careers in student affairs. In recent years I had become more curious about proprietary schools and did not know why I had not encountered many graduates of these institutions in professional settings. My goal was to dig deep into the screening process to understand hiring managers’ rationale for making certain decisions when evaluating applicants for a position. Now that I have found the answers I have been seeking, I would like to share this knowledge with the others who are engaged in studying human resource development.

My first step is to disseminate my research my colleagues in student affairs by sharing my findings in publications and at professional conferences. Until I began this study, I did not know much about mental models. Now that I understand how mental models are created and what they represent, I believe that it important to expose how they work when conducting a screening process. By dialoguing with other hiring managers and leaders within student affairs who play a role in the hiring process on college campuses, I am able to expose them to the types of biases that exist within student affairs and dialogue with them about the implications they present in our profession.

Second, I would like to find new outlets to share my research outside of student affairs. For example, much of my literature on screening and decision-making processes in this study came from the business and human resource development literature, and not education. What I learned is that theories such as screening theory and signaling theory are commonly used in business related disciplines. What I also learned from conducting this investigation is that there are other conceptual frameworks outside of cultural capital and human capital to explain decision making processes in higher education. Therefore, I would like to find ways to publish or present
my findings in other discipline areas to show the transferability of the finding within other professions.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from this study allowed me to better understand the hidden preferences, and beliefs, and biases held hiring managers in student affairs. Further, they provided deeper meaning to the screening process for entry-level positions in student affairs. Based on these findings, additional questions have been raised about other studies that could explore applicant screening in higher education. Therefore, several recommendations for future research are presented to further explore the how hiring mangers screen applicants for positions in student affairs.

1. One area that should be explored further is hiring managers’ perceptions of online degree programs. Past research studies have focused on hiring mangers’ preferences between traditional school and online degree programs (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, 2006; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). However, in these studies online degrees have not been clearly defined. Both traditional schools and proprietary schools award online degrees, but participants expressed the most concern about the credibility of online education at proprietary schools (Beaver, 2009; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). Some study participants made the distinction between online degrees from those offered by proprietary schools because they are associated with institutions that had a good reputation. The question that remains is whether or not hiring managers’ value online education from traditional schools. The recommendation is that a study be conducted to investigate hiring managers’ perception of all online degree programs at both traditional schools and proprietary schools.
2. This study was conducted at traditional colleges and universities in Carolinas region of the United States. It is not known whether or not these same findings would remain the same if the study was conducted in another region of the United States. My recommendation is that another study with hiring managers in student affairs be conducted in another region to see if hiring managers’ mental models remain the same. The findings would indicate if the hiring mangers’ preferences in this study are regionally-based or if hiring managers’ preferences are the same in another part of the country.

3. The study sample for this investigation was limited to only seven participants. Small sample sizes are not able to be generalized to a larger population. Therefore it is recommended that a larger sample be used to determine if the findings are the same or if there are other mental models that exist of student affairs hiring managers.

4. One nuance within the evidence indicated there might be a difference in how traditional schools and proprietary schools are viewed amongst hiring managers who have 25 or more years of experience in student affairs versus hiring managers who have less than 25 years of experience in student affairs. Two participants used the word “generational” to define the perceptions of more experienced professionals in student affairs. A third participant, who had less than 10 years of experience, indicated that the CSAO on her campus’ preference for traditional schools was generational. Participants who were younger and grew up with computers in the classroom were more likely to have used technology in their master’s degree program than older participants in the study. This is an area that I think should be explored further. Is there a generational difference in how hiring managers who went to graduate school in the 1970s and 1980s different than hiring
managers who went to school in the 1990s or later? My recommendation is that there be a study that investigates whether there are screening preferences that differ between different generations of student affairs professionals.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This study answered many personal and professional questions I had about the screening process in student affairs. I have served on numerous search committees for administrative, professional and faculty positions with colleagues from all across campus. Applicants are put through numerous screening processes in order to find a top individual for a position. This study attempted to understand how applicants are screened and the assumptions, preferences and biases they possess that influence the screening process. By revealing hiring managers mental models, potential applicants for positions in student affairs can understand what qualities professionals in student affairs are looking for so they can prepare themselves appropriately to be a competitive applicants. Further, the knowledge gained from this study provided insight into the many ways aspiring student affairs professionals can prepare for a career in higher education. Additionally, faculty coordinators of preparation programs can understand ways to strengthen their curriculum to provide the experiences that hiring managers are looking for in applicants.


Burkhardt, J. (2012). *A qualitative study of undergraduate international students’ everyday experience with cross-culture interactions and the student adjustment process*


Doyle, J.A. (2004). Where have we come from and where are we going? A review of past student affairs philosophies and analysis of the current student learning philosophy. *The


Columbia University.


Appendix A

Letter of Recruitment to Solicit Participants

Dear << Insert Name>>,

Hello. My name is Nikkole Davis and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. I am preparing to conduct research for my dissertation under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, and I am looking to interview hiring managers in student affairs who supervise new professionals at four-year colleges and universities in the Southeast.

The title of my study is “A Qualitative Study on Hiring Managers’ Screening Processes in College Student Affairs”. My purpose for conducting this study is to understand how hiring managers’ mental models influence how they screen new professionals for entry-level positions in student affairs. With your help I will be able to contribute to a body of research that seeks to understand what education background and types of experiences hiring managers most prefer when screening applicants for positions in student affairs. By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to share your ideas about what background you believe is most important for new professionals to demonstrate when seeking employment in student affairs.

Study participants will be asked to participate in a two interviews for approximately 60 minutes each. The first interview will be conducted face-to-face, however the second interview can be conducted via Skype ©, if necessary. Participants must also be available to answer follow-up questions via telephone or email after each interview. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to share information about your institution, your student affairs division, and how the job search process for vacant positions is conducted on your campus. Participation is strictly confidential and the identities of all participants will not be disclosed. However, if you agree to participate and decide later that you would prefer not to continue in the process, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

All participant interviews will be digitally-recorded and professionally transcribed. Additionally, participants will be able to review a typed summary of their interview after it has been transcribed. A summary of the research findings, along with excerpts from each of the participant
interviews will be published in my dissertation. The results may also be used in future publications and scholarly presentations.

If you are comfortable with the purpose of this study and are interested in reflecting on your experience as a hiring manager about what background is preferred for student affairs applicants, please complete and submit the attached questionnaire by November << XX>>. Only a select number of participants will be contacted to participate in interviews, which will be determined by their responses to the questionnaire.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.
Nikkole D. Davis, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Northeastern University
704-258-5723, cell phone
davis.n@husky.neu.edu
Appendix B

Informed Consent to Participate in Study

Northeastern University
Human Subject Research Protection
960 Renaissance Park
Boston, MA 02115

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. You met the selection criteria and are invited to participate in a doctoral study that will be conducted by Nikkole D. Davis, a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies and School of Education. This study is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. You are being invited to participate because are a student affairs administrator with at least 10 years of experience in college student affairs. Additionally, you indicated that you have served on at least three search committees in the past five years.

The title of my study is “A Qualitative Study on Hiring Managers’ Screening Processes in College Student Affairs”. The purpose of this study is to identify the mental models of hiring managers and investigate how they might influence how applicants are screened for positions in student affairs. This study is seeking information about your experiences with screening applicants using your ideas about what you believe makes someone an ideal candidate for professional positions in student affairs. You will not be asked to disclose any information regarding decisions you have made from previous job search processes.

As the researcher, I will answer any question you may have regarding this study and the specifics of your participation. Prior to the start of the interview, I will review an informed consent form with you and allow you to ask any questions that you may have about the study. You do not have to participate in the interview, but if you agree to do so, please sign this statement below and I, the researcher, will provide a copy for you to keep.

Each interview should last no longer than 60 minutes. I will come to your campus a time convenient for you to conduct the interview face-to-face. However, if necessary, please be aware that I may need to conduct a follow-up phone call to clarify or resolve any additional questions. In the first 10 minutes of the interview we will go over the informed consent form together. Your responses will be audio taped using a digital recorder while I take notes. Following the interview, I will need to take a self-guided tour of the campus. I will travel to your campus at my own expense. My preference is to conduct the interview in person; however, if your schedule
does not allow for a face-to-face interview, I can arrange for an interview using videoconferencing technology such as Skype©.

**Risks**
If you agree to participate in this study, there will be no more than a minimal risk anticipated. The only foreseeable risk, discomfort, or inconvenience is associated with your disclosure of your opinions about what qualities you look for in qualified student affairs applicants. However, due to sensitive nature of this investigation some participants may feel a higher degree of discomfort about discussing aspects of the screening process during a job search process. The majority of information that will be shared will be self-disclosed, thus affording each participant to decide what information they will or will not share. The interview will only ask participants to share the thought processes they use to make screening decisions about applicants. Please be reminded that your anonymity will always be protected.

**Benefits**
There are no direct benefits to you for participating; however, your responses to the interview questions resulting in the findings of the study will help me to inform college student affairs professionals what hiring managers’ ideas are regarding their preferences of student affairs professionals and how they impact the screening process.

**Confidentiality**
Your participation in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. I will be the only one that knows you have participated in this study. This means that no one will know that the answers you gave and which responses are attributed to you. Any reports of findings or publications based on this research will not identify you as being a participant in this study. I will use pseudonyms for each participant and institution where the participant is employed in order to reduce the risk of your identification. Example of pseudonyms: SA Administrator #1; Institution #1, etc. If someone needs to see my research information about you, it will be only authorized individuals of the Northeastern University’s Human Subject Research Protection and it will be only to ensure that I have conducted this research study properly. If any data is stolen, you will not bear any risk because your identifiable information including the institution where you are employed will be replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. The database in which I solicit you will be unidentifiable and confidential.

**Option to Not Participate**
The decision to participate in this research study is your decision and you may withdraw your decision to participate at any time. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to respond to any question asked. Even if you agree to participate and the study begins, you may still withdraw up until the data is transcribed.
**Access to Findings**
You will receive access to my interpretation of your responses in formulating the findings. You will be provided an electronic copy of a summary from your interview in order to make corrections. Lastly, you will also receive access to the findings at the conclusion of the study.

**Destruction of Data**
All audio recordings, field notes, transcribed data with identifiable information such as your name and institution will first be de-identified with a pseudonyms will be destroyed within one year after the completion of this study. I will personally destroy all audio recordings, interview transcripts with identifiable and de-identifiable data, and any other identifiable data. The hard copy of this informed consent form will be retained in a secured in a lockable file drawer for three years after the completion of this study and then destroyed. All data will be destroyed in a manner appropriate such as shredding or by any other appropriate means as directed by Northeastern University’ IRB human subject research protection policy.

**Compensation**
You will not incur any costs associated with your participation in this study. Also, there is no compensation for your participation.

**Contact Information**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me, Nikkole D. Davis at 704-258-572, cell or by email at davis.n@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, at el.bennett@neu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights in this research, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director of Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, telephone 617.373.7570, or irb@neu.edu. You can call anonymously if you wish.

_____________________________
Signature - Participant

_____________________________
Print Name - Participant

_____________________________
Date
## Appendix C

### Recruitment Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Questions</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact phone number and email.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male&lt;br&gt;Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>White/Caucasian&lt;br&gt;Black/African-American&lt;br&gt;Asian/Pacific Islander&lt;br&gt;Native American&lt;br&gt;Latino/Hispanic&lt;br&gt;Middle Eastern&lt;br&gt;Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Title</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Institution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your institution public or private?</td>
<td>Public&lt;br&gt;Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the level of your position at your institution.</td>
<td>Senior Student Affairs Officer&lt;br&gt;Mid-Manager&lt;br&gt;Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many years have you been employed in your current position?</td>
<td>0 – 3&lt;br&gt;4 – 6&lt;br&gt;7 – 9&lt;br&gt;10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many years have you worked full-time in student affairs?</td>
<td>0 – 3&lt;br&gt;4 – 6&lt;br&gt;7 – 9&lt;br&gt;10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many student affairs professionals (with master’s degrees) do you supervise?</td>
<td>0&lt;br&gt;1-3&lt;br&gt;4-6&lt;br&gt;7-9&lt;br&gt;10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you currently supervise new professionals (with master’s degrees) with 0-3 years of experience?</td>
<td>Yes&lt;br&gt;No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you supervise new professionals, how many do you supervise?</td>
<td>0&lt;br&gt;1-3&lt;br&gt;4-6&lt;br&gt;7-9&lt;br&gt;10 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many search committees for master’s degree level positions have you served on in the past 5 years?</td>
<td>0 – 2&lt;br&gt;3 – 5&lt;br&gt;6 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your highest degree awarded?</td>
<td>Bachelor’s&lt;br&gt;Master’s&lt;br&gt;PhD/EdD&lt;br&gt;J.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please list your educational background and where you obtained your academic credentials.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

Protocol for Interview #1

Before the interview begins, I will review the consent form and go over the purpose of the study with each participant. Each interview participant will sign and date two copies of the form. The interview participant will keep one copy and the other one will be filed and secured by me.

Introduction/Warm-up Questions

1. Tell me about yourself, including your education, career path and professional experience in student affairs.
2. What is your definition of student affairs?
3. What student affairs professional associations are you a member of? How has your membership influenced your career?

SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS OFFICERS’ MENTAL MODELS

1. Describe your image of an ideal applicant for an entry-level position in student affairs?
2. Define what it means for an applicant to be “a good fit?”

   Sub-questions:
   - Describe what “a good fit” looks like at your institution.
   - Describe what “a good fit” looks like in your department.

3. Describe in detail the preferred educational background of applicants for positions in student affairs applicant.
4. Describe the preferred career path of applicants for positions in student affairs applicant.
5. What are you looking for when you review an applicant’s resume’ when hiring for a positions in student affairs?

Investigator allows interview participant to review job descriptions at this time.

6. Based on the job descriptions that you have just reviewed, describe in detail what characteristics you believe make an ideal candidate for an entry-level position in student affairs.

Sub-questions:

- Describe in priority order the things you would be looking for on an applicants’ resume’.
Appendix E

Protocol for Interview #2

Before the interview begins I will go over what happened at the previous interview and highlight some of the questions that were asked. Next, I will discuss what the purpose of this second interview which is to discuss the screening process used for positions at their institution.

SCREENING PROCESS

1. Walk me through the steps used on your campus to fill a vacant position in student affairs.

   Sub-questions:
   
   • Describe how a search process is conducted in your department.
   
   • How are decisions reached when screening applicants?

2. Describe human resources’ involvement in the screening process.

3. How does your institution use technology in the screening process?

TRADITIONAL AND PROPRIETARY SCHOOL MASTER’S DEGREE PROGRAMS

1. Tell me what you know about proprietary schools.

   Sub-questions:
   
   • What are your perceptions about degrees earned from online proprietary schools?
   
   • What are your perceptions of graduate programs in student affairs at proprietary schools?

   • What are your perceptions of applicants with graduate degrees from proprietary schools?
Scenario: You only have one final slot to interview someone for a position and the decision is between two candidates with the same credentials with similar qualifications, except one applicant went to a traditional student affairs program and the other went to an online program at a proprietary school. Question: Who will get the last interview slot and describe why you came to that decision.
Appendix F

Student Diversity Programs Program Coordinator

JOB DESCRIPTION

The Student Diversity Programs Program Coordinator is a full-time, 12-month position. As a member of the Student Diversity Programs staff, the Program Coordinator will assist the Director of Student Diversity Programs with the daily operations of the Office of Student Diversity Programs (OSDP). This position exists to provide and market opportunities for students to participate in diversity and cultural programming that are consistent with student development and cultural identity theory based on learning outcomes. The Program Coordinator is responsible for creating, implementing, marketing and assessing diversity program initiatives as well as developing and implementing cross-cultural programming for all students with an emphasis on multicultural/social justice competencies. This position requires flexibility to work nights and weekends. The Program Coordinator serves as an advisor for OSDP clubs and organizations, assists in the creation and advising of a peer diversity training and advocacy organization and is responsible for assisting in the supervision of student staff under federal work-study position requirements. This position works to enhance a growing sense of community by fostering students’ awareness and appreciation of differences on a diverse campus.
Appendix G

Resident Director

JOB DESCRIPTION

A resident director is a full-time, live-in professional staff member responsible for the operation of one or more residence halls, housing between 250-900 residents. The Resident Director supervises a staff of 8-20 undergraduate and graduate Resident Assistants and creates a healthy living/learning environment through creative programming, counseling, facility management, policy implementation, and central office duties. The Resident Director maintains extensive student and staff contact through weekly staff meetings, hall committees, advisement of the hall government, judicial hearings, programming, personal counseling, crisis intervention, and regular office hours.
Assistant Director for Greek Life

JOB DESCRIPTION

The Assistant Director for Greek Life is a key position in the Division of Student Affairs. Reporting to the Associate Director for Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL), the Assistant Director serves as a member of the Office of Leadership and Student Involvement (OLSI) team and participates in the development, enrichment and assessment of the university’s vibrant and diverse FSL community. The mission of the Office of Leadership and Student Involvement is to provide opportunities and resources for students and the university community in campus life and leadership through intentional programs and resources that facilitate holistic development.

The Assistant Director will work directly with the Associate Director for FSL and oversee 23 chapters composed of over 700 students. This individual will be responsible for strategically enhancing the Greek community and serve in an advisory role to the Interfraternity Council (IFC), and/or the College Panhellenic Council (CPC), and/or the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and thus supports the chapters that comprise these three councils. The position is essential in providing a forum for fraternity and sorority members to discuss fraternal values, risk management, and social justice. This individual will support and oversee the program initiatives, community service efforts and philanthropy of these organizations and will support the Associated Director in coordinating all FSL signature programs and will directly be responsible for teaching an academic credit bearing Greek leadership Course (LEAD).
Appendix I

Confirmation of Participation/Scheduling of Interview

(Phone/Email Script)

Hello [Participant Name],

This is Nikkole Davis! Thank you for responding to the recruitment questionnaire that was emailed to you recently and indicating your interest in participating in my study. Based on your responses, I would like to request an interview with you. This email serves as an official request to set up an interview for us to meet for an initial interview. I am requesting that you select a preferred date and time and an alternate date and time for the initial interview. As stated in the recruitment letter, two interviews will be needed to collect all pertinent data. Each interview should only last approximately 60 minutes. The second interview will be scheduled at the conclusion of the first interview.

Preferred date and time for initial interview:

____________________________________

Alternate date and time for initial interview:

____________________________________

Please indicate below the location where the interview will take place:

____________________________________
Additionally, I am attaching the form for the *Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study*, the *Interview Guide*, and copies of three job descriptions for you to review before our interview. This information should assist you with any questions you may have regarding your rights as well as prepare you for the interview. I will request you to sign two informed consent forms in front of me after we review it at the beginning of the scheduled interview.

Again, if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by email at davis.n@husky.neu.edu or cell phone at 704-258-5723. Also, my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, can be contacted by email at el.bennett@neu.edu.

I look forward to seeing you soon!

Nikkole D. Davis